Breakfast of Champions

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KURT VONNEGUT

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was the youngest of three children born to Kurt Vonnegut, Sr., an architect, and Edith Lieber, a socialite whose wealthy family owned a successful brewing company. Vonnegut's family was hit hard during the Great Depression, and after Prohibition effectively shutdown Lieber's family brewery, they were all but destitute. Vonnegut attended public high school in Indianapolis, and in 1940, began studying biochemistry at Cornell University. Vonnegut had little interest in biochemistry, and his grades were poor, but he did work as a writer and editor for the university's newspaper, *The Cornell Daily Sun*. Vonnegut's grades eventually landed him on academic probation, and in 1943, he dropped out of Cornell without earning his degree. Considering World War II, Vonnegut assumed he would be drafted, so he proactively joined the United States Army. On Mother's Day in 1944, after a long struggle with depression, Vonnegut's mother committed suicide with a combination of alcohol, prescription drugs, and sleeping pills. Vonnegut was soon deployed to Europe and fought in the 1944 Battle of the Bulge, where he was taken as a prison-of-war and sent to a camp in Dresden, Germany. Vonnegut survived the bombing of the city by the Allied forces in 1945 and was soon liberated and sent back to the United States. Later that year, Vonnegut married Jane Marie Cox, his high school sweetheart, and the couple went on to have three children. Vonnegut held several odd jobs, including work as a publicist and a copy writer for an advertising agency, and continued to write in his spare time. He enrolled at the University of Chicago to study Anthropology, but again left before completing his degree after his proposal for his master's thesis was rejected. Vonnegut published his first novel, *Player Piano*, in 1952, and while it was received well by critics, it was considered a commercial flop. The novel focuses on factory workers who are replaced by machines, a theme that is also reflected in *Breakfast of Champions*. In 1958, Vonnegut adopted his sister's three young sons after she died of cancer, and while he continued to write to support his large family, he did not reach commercial success until the 1969 publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which skyrocketed Vonnegut to fame. In 1971, Vonnegut and Cox finally divorced after several years of marital strife, and in 1972, Vonnegut's son suffered a mental breakdown. Vonnegut married his second wife, Jill Krementz, in 1979 and together they adopted a daughter, Lily. In 1984, Vonnegut suffered his own mental breakdown and suicide attempt after struggling with depression and anxiety for decades. Vonnegut continued to write well into his 80s, and in 2007 at the age of 84, he died of a brain injury after falling in his New York City home.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kurt Vonnegut is an icon of the American countercultural movement. Counterculture began in the United Kingdom in the early 1960s, but the anti-establishment movement culminated with the peace, love, and rock-n-roll of the American hippie movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. American counterculture was defined by an opposition to conventional social, political, and economic beliefs and practices, and was fueled by the Civil Rights Movement, second-wave feminism, and anti-war sentiments following the Second World War and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam. The countercultural movement saw the British Invasion and welcomed musical acts like the Beatles, the Who, and the Rolling Stones, and it also gave birth to Woodstock, the famous 1969 music festival that boasted Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, and several others on its famous setlist. The counterculture responded to tremendous political upheaval, including the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. The movement also explored human sexuality and psychoactive drug use, protested war and social injustices, and espoused differing beliefs and interpretations regarding the reality and attainability of the American Dream. In addition to Vonnegut, other notable members of the countercultural movement include feminist Gloria Steinem, beat poet Allen Ginsberg, and painter Andy Warhol.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* is the epitome of postmodern literature, which, although hard to define, often involves some sort of social or cultural critique. Postmodern works of literature usually employ deconstructionist approaches, or the assumption that language is fluid and arbitrary, and therefore unstable. James Joyce's 1939 publication of *Finnegans Wake* is generally accepted as the beginning of the postmodern era. Other famous works of postmodern literature include *Labyrinths* by Jorge Luis Borges and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. The postmodern era's preoccupation with language is seen throughout *Breakfast of Champions*, most notably in Kilgore's obsession with corporate logos. When Kilgore asks why certain products or companies are named certain words, the answer, invariably, is that someone "liked the *sound* of it." From a postmodern viewpoint, language does not have inherent meaning; rather, the meaning of language is a reflection of social convenience and convention. Postmodern literature is also marked by intertextuality, or the weaving together of outside literary

works into a single piece of writing. The characters of *Breakfast of Champions*, including Kilgore Trout and Eliot Rosewater, appear in several of Vonnegut's other stories and novels, like *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Jailbird*. Vonnegut mentions other literary works in the novel as well, including *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott and William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Other famous works of literature that engage and explore intertextuality are John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, which is a retelling of the legend of King Arthur, and, more recently, *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday*
- **When Written:** Early 1970s
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1973
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Metafiction, Satire
- **Setting:** The American Midwest
- **Climax:** When Dwayne Hoover goes insane and "runs amok" in Midland City, violently assaulting his son, Bunny, and several innocent bystanders.
- **Antagonist:** American society; Dwayne's struggle with mental health
- **Point of View:** First-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Free Books! The Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library in Vonnegut's hometown, Indianapolis, is the home of Vonnegut's typewriter and several signed copies of his work, but they also continue to honor the author's fight against censorship. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a book often banned in public schools, is given free at the door to any student whose school has banned it.

Follow Me on Twitter. Despite his death in 2007, a Twitter account dedicated to Vonnegut is alive and well, tweeting Vonnegut's witticisms multiple times a day. Famous Vonnegut quotes populate the account, including "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be," and "Evolution is so creative. That's how we got giraffes."

PLOT SUMMARY

Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* follows Kilgore Trout, a little-known science fiction writer, and Dwayne Hoover, a mentally ill car salesman, and their chance meeting at an arts festival in the American Midwest. Kilgore earns his living installing aluminum storm windows but spends most of his time writing. He doesn't consider himself a real artist, however, and while he is the author of over one hundred novels and two thousand short stories, he doesn't bother to tell anyone that he is a writer. Most of Kilgore's work is published in pornography magazines, and he never keeps carbon copies of his writing, which he claims to "detest."

One day, Kilgore receives his first piece of fan mail from Eliot Rosewater, an "eccentric millionaire" who believes Kilgore is America's greatest living novelist. Kilgore assumes Rosewater is just "some kid," or worse, mentally ill, and he thinks little of the letter until he is suddenly invited to speak at an arts festival in Midland City. "Why all this sudden interest in Kilgore Trout?" Kilgore asks his pet parakeet, Bill. As it turns out, Eliot Rosewater had convinced the Chairman of the festival to invite Kilgore in exchange for the use of his **El Greco, a three-million-dollar painting** from the Spanish Renaissance. Against his better judgement, Kilgore decides to go the festival and give them what they have never seen before—an artist who devoted his entire life to the "search for truth and beauty—and didn't find doodley-squat!"

Dwayne Hoover, on the other hand, is a "fabulously well-to-do" businessman from Midland City. His principal business, Dwayne Hoover's Exit Eleven Pontiac Village, is known as one of the best places to work in town, but Dwayne is slowly spiraling into insanity. Dwayne's mental problems are due in part to the "bad chemicals" naturally occurring in his brain, but he is further stressed by his wife, Celia's, suicide and the life choices of his son, Bunny, a "notorious homosexual." Dwayne tries to keep his insanity private, but as his condition worsens, he can no longer disguise his illness. Dwayne presents as excessively happy and he often breaks out into inappropriate singing. He frequently hallucinates and sees a duck directing traffic and parking lots made of trampolines. Dwayne even begins to compulsively repeat others' words. Still, no one in Midland City seems to notice that Dwayne is suffering, and he is left alone in his fancy house with his dog, Sparky, and a loaded thirty-eight caliber revolver.

As Kilgore hitchhikes his way to Midland City, he first stops off in New York City to search pornographic bookstores for copies of his writing. He hopes to spend the night in a movie theater too, because he can't afford a hotel room, but also because he has heard that sleeping in movie theaters is "the sort of thing really dirty old men" do. Kilgore wants to arrive in Midland City "the dirtiest of old men" and "be treated like a cockroach." He never does get the chance to sleep in a movie theater, however, and instead is abducted and left unconscious with his pants around his ankles under the Queensboro Bridge.

Still, Kilgore is not deterred, and he soon hitches a ride out of the city with a truck driver hauling "seventy-eight thousand pounds of Spanish olives." Moving closer toward the festival now, Kilgore is confronted by a polluted and rotting countryside—the evidence of a destroyed and dying planet.

According to Kilgore, it won't be long until the Earth's atmosphere is "unbreathable," which will be the end of the world. "Any time now," Kilgore says. "And high time, too." Kilgore is of the opinion that humanity deserves to die a horrible death because they have "behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet."

Meanwhile, as Kilgore inches closer and closer to Midland City, Dwayne Hoover inches closer and closer to insanity. He verbally abuses his friend and longtime employee, Harry LaSabre, simply because Harry mentions that he regrets never having or adopting children. Dwayne, who is happens to be adopted, blows up at Harry and insults his clothing, which Dwayne thinks is too drab and muted for automotive sales. Dwayne continues to verbally berate his employees, and after spending the afternoon in a hotel room with Francine Pefko, his secretary and mistress, Dwayne accuses her of being a "whore" who is only using him for his money. "Oh, God, Dwayne—" Francine says, "you've changed, you've changed." Dwayne admits that he has "lost his way," and he decides to go to the Arts Festival and talk to the "distinguished" artists about truth, beauty, and the meaning of life.

Kilgore finally makes it to Midland City and meets Dwayne in the cocktail lounge of the local Holiday Inn, but Vonnegut himself has entered the bar as well— "incognito" in a pair of **mirrored** sunglasses. Vonnegut has come to watch his creations collide, and after an uncomfortable interaction, Dwayne snatches Kilgore's novel, *Now It Can Be Told*, directly out of Kilgore's hands.

The novel is in the form of a letter from the Creator of the Universe to The Man, the Creator's test subject and the only living creature with free will. Everyone else is a "fully automated robot" whose only purpose is to "stir [him] up in every conceivable way." Dwayne mistakes Kilgore's book for reality, which, Dwayne assumes, perfectly explains his tragic life. If everyone else is a robot, then his wife wasn't a depressant who committed suicide, she was simply a machine programmed to self-destruct; likewise, Bunny isn't really a homosexual, he is just a machine programmed that way.

Dwayne's break with reality causes him to violently attack Bunny—after all, he is just a robot—and anyone else who gets in the way. He even goes back to his dealership and gives Francine Pefko the beating his "bad chemicals make him believe she so richly deserves." Ultimately, Dwayne bites off the tip of Kilgore's fingers and is sent away to a mental institution, and Kilgore, who believes "ideas and the lack of them can cause disease," becomes a revered scholar in the field of mental health, but not before meeting Vonnegut himself.

At the end of *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut approaches Kilgore and explains himself as his "Creator," and then he sets him free. "Under similar spiritual conditions," Vonnegut tells Kilgore, "Count Tolstoy freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career." After giving Kilgore his freedom, Vonnegut "disappears," leaving Kilgore confused and alone on the streets of a strange city.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kilgore Trout – One of the main characters in *Breakfast of Champions*, Kilgore is a prolific but little-known science fiction writer. Of course, no one other than Eliot Rosewater, an "eccentric millionaire" and Kilgore's only fan, has ever heard of Kilgore Trout, who makes his actual living installing aluminum storm windows. Reputable publishers would never dream of accepting his work, and most of his novels and short stories are published by "World Classics Library," a company in the business of "hard-core pornography." Kilgore never keeps copies of his work and he never knows when or where his writing will be published, so when he is invited to speak at an arts festival in the American Midwest, he is convinced there must be some mistake. Initially, Kilgore has no desire to go to the festival and make a "laughing stock" of himself, but he decides "an unhappy failure" is exactly what the festival needs. He vows to show them what they have never seen before: an artist who devoted his life "to a search for truth and beauty—and didn't find doodley-squat!" Kilgore's work, although often absurd, offers surprisingly powerful commentary on pressing social issues, such as environmental pollution, overpopulation, and the role and responsibility of art and artists. One of his novels, *Now It Can Be Told*, is in the form of a letter from the Creator of the Universe to the Man—the only living creature with free will in a universe otherwise populated by "fully automated robots"—and it turns Dwayne Hoover, a mentally ill car salesman, into a "homicidal maniac." Kilgore, who believes that "ideas or the lack of them cause disease," becomes a prominent figure in the field of mental health after Dwayne's public breakdown, and he "advances his theories" though his writing, which becomes wildly popular. It is through the character of Kilgore Trout that the novel critiques the role of art and artists in American society and ultimately concludes that art's value and meaning are completely subjective and open to interpretation.

Dwayne Hoover – One of the main characters in *Breakfast of Champions* and the owner/operator of Dwayne Hoover's Exit Eleven Pontiac Village. Dwayne is Celia's husband, Bunny's father, and stepbrother to the twins, Lyle and Kyle. Dwayne personifies capitalist greed, and as the owner of nearly twenty local businesses, he is fueled by the possibility of never-ending profits. Dwayne also reflects American society's struggle with mental illness, and after the stress of his wife's suicide and his son's homosexuality, he begins a slow break with reality. Dwayne's insanity first manifests as excessive happiness and

inappropriate singing, and he soon begins to hallucinate ducks directing traffic and asphalt parking lots that turn into trampolines. Dwayne is also inflicted with echolalia, or a compulsion to repeat the last word spoken to him, yet the citizens of Midland City still don't seem to notice his suffering. After Dwayne accuses Francine Pefko, his secretary and mistress, of being "a whore" who is trying to extort a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise out of him, he grows concerned over his own behavior. "I've lost my way," Dwayne says as he sets out to find a "brand new viewpoint on life." His search brings him to the Arts Festival, where the "distinguished" artists are sure to have the inside track on truth and the meaning of life. There, he finds Kilgore Trout, a failed writer, and his novel, *Now It Can Be Told*, which ultimately turns Dwayne into a "homicidal maniac." Kilgore's novel focuses on the Man, the only living creature with free will in a fictional universe occupied by "fully automated machines." In his fragile mental state, Dwayne mistakes Kilgore's book for reality. If everybody in his life is a machine, programmed to behave this way or that, then Dwayne does not have to grapple with the deeper issues of mental health, suicide, or sexuality, which mirrors American society's broader efforts to likewise avoid sensitive issues. After a stint in a mental institution, Dwayne is sued by his victims and "rendered destitute." Through Dwayne Hoover, the novel argues the importance of recognizing the warning signs of mental illness and highlights the dangers of taking art too seriously and searching too deeply for meaning within it.

Kurt Vonnegut – The author of *Breakfast of Champions* and "the Creator" of all the characters. *Breakfast of Champions* is Vonnegut's fiftieth birthday present to himself, and he uses it as means to "cleanse" his mind and rid it of all the nonsense that has accumulated there. The things in Vonnegut's mind—the destruction of the planet, mental illness, systemic racism, and the uneven distribution of wealth—are "useless and ugly" and "don't fit together nicely." Through his novel, he "throws out" these social injustices and others, and he even "throws out" characters from past novels. "I'm not going to put on anymore puppet shows," Vonnegut writes. As Vonnegut writes, he repeatedly interjects to offer insight into characters and situations, to provide background information and context, or simply to remind the reader that the book and everyone in it is his creation. Like Dwayne Hoover, Vonnegut struggles with his own mental health. He frequently mentions taking medication, so he doesn't "feel blue," and he even talks about Martha, his psychiatrist, whom he "likes a lot." Vonnegut depicts his own mental illness, as well as others', to destigmatize and normalize mental illness. He argues for visibility and help, and he implores readers to notice and act when they witness mental illness and suffering in others. Vonnegut pushes his metafictional novel even further yet, and when his characters converge at the Arts Festival in Midland City, he enters the lounge at the Holiday Inn. There, "incognito" behind a pair of **mirrored** sunglasses, Vonnegut is "transformed" by Rabo Karabekian's **painting**, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Vonnegut refers to his transformation as "the spiritual climax of the book," during which he is reminded that everyone, including his characters, possesses a "sacred" and deep "unwavering band of light." In this way, Vonnegut reminds his readers that *all* humans are sentient beings who deserve to be respected and heard. Ultimately, Vonnegut comes face-to-face with his character, Kilgore Trout, and grants him his "freedom." Even Kilgore has an "unwavering band of light," and as such, is not right for Vonnegut to own him. When Vonnegut sets Kilgore free, he metaphorically rejects all forms of slavery and discrimination.

Rabo Karabekian – A minimal painter and one of the "distinguished" artists invited to the Arts Festival in Midland City. Fred T. Barry purchases **Rabo's painting**, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, to display at the Mildred Barry Center for the Arts. The painting, a childish swath of green paint with a strip of orange reflective tape, nearly causes a scandal in Midland City because of its fifty-thousand-dollar price tag. No one can believe the arts center has paid so much for such little work, but after Rabo explains the painting as a representation of "an unwavering band of light," Midland City begins to see its worth. Rabo's outlandish explanation of his art, and Midland City's easy and immediate acceptance of it, reflects the arbitrary, and often absurd, meaning of art. Rabo's painting also implies that art does not have inherent or universal value, and that art is often about making money, not a deeper search for truth or beauty. Despite this satirical representation of art, however, Vonnegut still argues art's worth, and even suggests that is "sacred." Rabo's poetic explanation of his painting brings about the "spiritual climax" of the novel and "transforms" Vonnegut in the process. It is with Rabo's speech about "unwavering bands of light" that Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative begins to unravel and he starts to see people, including his literary characters, as not simply machines but as sentient human beings with thoughts and emotions.

George / Bunny Hoover – Dwayne and Celia Hoover's son, and a "notorious homosexual." Originally named George, Dwayne's son is known as Bunny in Midland City. Dwayne's mental anguish is due in large part to his disillusionment with Bunny's sexuality, which first came to light during Bunny's childhood when he confided in Dwayne that "he wished he was a woman instead of a man." Dwayne responded by sending Bunny to military school, but the United States Military, an institution "devoted to homicide and absolutely humorless obedience," did nothing but provide Bunny with eight years "of uninterrupted sports, buggery and Fascism." Bunny excels at military school, but the skills he learns are "useless," and he winds up playing the piano in the cocktail lounge of the Holiday Inn in Midland City. Bunny is a talented pianist—far too good to be playing in a Midwestern cocktail lounge—but he forces himself to endure through "Transcendental Meditation." Bunny is "pale" and "unhealthy," and lives the life of a depressed hermit in a

"flophouse" in the most dangerous part of town known as "Skid Row." Bunny is Dwayne's primary target when he loses his mind and physically assaults the citizens of Midland City, and as Dwayne beats Bunny's face of the keys of a baby Grand Piano, Bunny never tries to fight back. After Dwayne's mental breakdown, Bunny "responds so grotesquely that there is talk of putting [him] in the booby hatch, too."

Young Black Man / Wayne Hoobler – A recent parolee from the Adult Correctional Institution at Shepherdstown and a direct descendant of Josephus Hoobler. Wayne represents the stereotypical black criminal who becomes institutionalized because his racist society assumes that since he is a black man, he belongs behind bars. From orphanages to juvenile homes and prisons, Wayne has grown accustomed to living in "cages," so much so that he "misses the clash of steel doors" after he is released from prison. Wayne thinks that Earth is "terrible," and he has only a "feeble will to survive." His life's ambition is to work for Dwayne Hoover, whose advertisements he has seen and heard time and time again. Wayne dreams of "a better world," or "Fairy Land," free from the racism and oppression of American society. He serves as a sort of foil to Dwayne Hoover, who because of his white skin, enjoys privileges otherwise denied to Wayne. Dwayne and Wayne have practically the same name and come from practically the same place, their only difference is how society views and accepts them. Wayne Hoobler underscores the mass incarceration of black men in American society, but he also emphasizes the novel's central argument that "white robots are just like black robots, in that they are programmed to be whatever they are, to do whatever they do."

Francine Pefko – Dwayne Hoover's secretary and mistress. Francine's husband is killed in the Vietnam War, and after Dwayne's wife, Celia, commits suicide, Dwayne and Francine begin an affair. Francine reflects a stereotypical woman who lives to serve and comfort her man, and even when Dwayne treats her badly and verbally abuses her, she continues to profess her love for him. She is incredibly loyal to Dwayne and sings his praises to anyone who will listen. One day, after sneaking off to a hotel with Dwayne in the middle of the afternoon, she makes a racist reference to black people in Shepherdstown and suggests that Dwayne open a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise there. Dwayne, who is mentally ill, snaps and accuses her of being "a whore" who is only trying to squeeze a chicken franchise out of him. Francine ultimately forgives him, but the incident lingers with Dwayne, and after he goes completely insane, he physically assaults Francine and gives her the public beating he believes "she so richly deserves." Like most people in Midland City, Francine fails to notice Dwayne's mental decline until it is too late. Francine's failure to notice and respond to Dwayne's "cries for help" echo American society's broader tendency to ignore the mentally ill until they become a public nuisance.

Harry LeSabre – Grace's husband and Dwayne Hoover's "white sales manager." Harry, despite being named after a Buick, has worked in Dwayne's Pontiac dealership in Midland City for over twenty years. He is also "fabulously well-to-do," having struck it rich in the stock market after purchasing cheap stock in Xerox years ago. Harry is a "secret transvestite," and when Dwayne criticizes the drab clothing Harry usually wears to work, he is certain that Dwayne has discovered his secret. He is the only one in Midland City to notice Dwayne's mental decline, yet he does nothing to help, and instead quits his job and buys a condominium on Maui. Harry LeSabre is an example of American society's inclination to sidestep or ignore those who present with symptoms of mental illness.

Celia Hoover – Dwayne Hoover's wife and Bunny's mother. Like Vonnegut's own mother, Celia commits suicide when she drinks a bottle of Drāno, a type of commercial drain cleaner. Celia struggles with her mental health for several years before she kills herself, yet her family never seems to notice. Celia represents mental illness and suicide within American society, but more specifically, her experiences and the indifference of her family echoes society's tendency to avoid acknowledging and treating mental illness, and the tragic consequences of that avoidance.

Kago – The main character in Kilgore Trout's novel, *Plague on Wheels*. The novel takes place on a "dying planet" named Lingo-Three that is inhabited by reproducing American-made automobiles. The pollution caused by the cars leads the planet to the brink of extinction when Kago, the leader of a group of aliens, arrives on Lingo-Three to meet the cars before they become "defunct." Kago tells the automobiles that they will "be gone but not forgotten," and then he takes their memory to Earth. Within one hundred years, the Earthlings likewise destroy their own plant with pollution from automobiles, and Kago is mistakenly killed by an autoworker in a bar. Together, Kago and Kilgore's novel, *Plague on Wheels*, are a warning of the environmental dangers associated with the automotive industry.

Eliot Rosewater – An "eccentric millionaire" and Kilgore Trout's one and only fan. Eliot Rosewater talks Fred T. Barry into inviting Kilgore to the Arts Festival in Midland City by offering Barry use of a valuable **El Greco painting** to display during the Festival. Rosewater believes that Kilgore is "the greatest living American novelist" and should be the President of the United States. He spends eighteen thousand dollars on a private investigator to find Kilgore just so he can send him fan mail, and he has a personal library containing most of Kilgore's collected works. Of course, Kilgore is a complete failure, a "nobody" writer, yet Eliot Rosewater finds extreme value in his work. In this way, Rosewater emphasizes the subjectivity of art, which implies that art's value is neither inherent nor universal.

Leo Trout – Kilgore Trout's only son. Leo is a grown man and has not seen or spoken to his father in years. He left home as a

teenager and joined the military; at which time he wrote Kilgore a letter that read: "I pity you. You've crawled up your own asshole and died." Years later, the Federal Bureau of Investigation knocks on Kilgore's door and informs him that Leo has committed "high treason" and joined the Viet Cong (a communist political organization in Vietnam and Cambodia in the mid-twentieth century).

Fred T. Barry – The Chairman of the Arts Festival in celebration of the opening of the Mildred Barry Memorial Center for the Arts in Midland City. Fred T. Barry invites Kilgore Trout to be a "distinguished" guest and speaker at the festival as a favor to Eliot Rosewater, an "eccentric millionaire" and Kilgore's only fan. Barry is also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Barrytron, Ltd., and he gives Kilgore stock in the company to make him "feel like a member of [their] family."

Cyprian Ukwende – An emergency room physician at the hospital in Midland City. Dr. Ukwende is a black man from Nigeria, but since America doesn't "produce nearly enough doctors for all the sick people it has," they must bring in doctors from other countries to make up the difference. Dr. Ukwende is on *Martha*, the disaster response vehicle that responds to Dwayne Hoover's public mental breakdown, but he also witnesses Dwayne's mental health begin to unravel in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn. When Dwayne walks out into the parking lot and hallucinates that the concrete has turned into "a trampoline," he goes "blooping" across the pavement, but all Ukwende does is comment on the weather. He completely ignores Dwayne's behavior, which is evidence of his deteriorating mental state—in essence, "a cry for help"—and this echoes mainstream society's tendency to avoid facing and dealing with mental illness. Ukwende is a *doctor*, the very person who is charged with the health and well-being of others, yet he does nothing to help Dwayne, who ultimately winds up hurting several other people during an episode of acute insanity.

The Truck Driver – Kilgore Trout hitches a ride out of New York City with the truck driver, who is "hauling seventy-eight thousand pounds of Spanish olives." The truck driver used to be an avid hunter and fisherman, but now the state of polluted forests and streams "breaks his heart." Ironically, the truck driver contributes to that heartbreaking pollution as he drives back and forth across the county delivering consumer goods in a state-of-the-art rig powered by a "three hundred and twenty-four horsepower Cummins Diesel engine." The truck driver metaphorically represents those in American society who lament environmental pollution but do nothing to help, and worse, actively contribute to the problem.

Kyle Hoover – Lyle Hoover's twin brother and Dwayne Hoover's stepbrother. Kyle and Lyle are the biological children of Dwayne's adoptive parents, who hadn't been able to conceive until *after* they adopted Dwayne, a "common phenomenon" it seems. As babies, Kyle and Lyle would "suck each other's thumbs," and they still live next door to each other in identical ranch houses. Kyle is the quiet twin, and he "hasn't spoken a thousand words since 1954." Together with Dwayne, Kyle and Lyle run the Sacred Miracle Cave, a local tourist attraction that is being taken over by the toxic industrial waste from Barrytron, Ltd. As the waste fills the cave and threatens to cripple their business, Lyle and Kyle respond by opening fire on it with Browning Automatic Shotguns. Of course, this only makes the problem worse, but Kyle and Lyle don't care about the environment—they only care about the cave because it is their sole source of income. Their ridiculous solution only addresses the pollution that threatens their cave, not the source of the pollution, which reflects the efforts of those in mainstream American society who refuse to confront environmental problems directly and instead treat only the symptoms of pollution.

Lyle Hoover – Kyle Hoover's twin brother and Dwayne Hoover's stepbrother. Lyle is a carbon copy of Kyle, and even Dwayne was not able to tell them apart until 1954 when Lyle's nose was broken in a fight over a woman at the Roller Derby. Now, Lyle is the twin with the broken nose, and he also does most of the talking between the two. Lyle is the one who tells Dwayne about the industrial waste taking over the Sacred Miracle Cave, and he also tells his stepbrother about their efforts to combat the pollution by riddling it with shotgun shells. When Lyle and Kyle open fire on the toxic waste collecting in the cave, they reflect society's futile tendency to treat only the symptoms of environmental pollution rather than going directly after the cause.

Josephus Hoobler – The original owner of Bluebird Farm, the property currently owned by Dwayne Hoover and his family. Josephus was a freed slave who purchased the farm after moving North to work in the factories. His descendants ran the farm until the bank foreclosed on the mortgage during the Depression. A wealthy white man bought the farm, but he lost it in an out-of-court settlement with Dwayne's stepfather after running him over with his car.

Patty Keene – A white waitress in one of Dwayne Hoover's Burger Chef franchises. Patty is a seventeen-year-old "brand-new adult," and she is working as a waitress to pay her dying father's hospital bills. She has already failed out of high school, but Patty is "stupid on purpose." She has programmed herself, "in the interest of survival," to be "an agreeing machine instead of a thinking machine." Patty does not have any original thoughts of her own and instead just thinks what others think. She is raped by Don Breedlove behind the George Hickman Bannister Memorial Fieldhouse after a basketball game, but she never reports it because with her father "dying of cancer of the colon and then cancer of the everything," there is "enough trouble already." Patty is an obvious example of violence against women in American society, but she also personifies the common stereotype that women, especially beautiful women,

must also be stupid.

Don Breedlove – Perhaps the most despicable character in *Breakfast of Champions*, and the only character to get "what is coming to [him] in the end." Don Breedlove, a white man, is a married father of three and works as a gas-conversion unit installer. He rapes seventeen-year-old Patty Keene behind the George Hickman Bannister Memorial Fieldhouse, and he is the father of Gloria Browning's "destroyed fetus." Don Breedlove is so hateful that the neighborhood kids pour maple syrup in the gas tank of his car, and when it can't be fixed, he accuses Dwayne Hoover of selling him "a lemon." He is at the Holiday Inn servicing a gas oven the night Dwayne goes insane, and he is rendered deaf after Dwayne punches him in the ear.

George Hickman Bannister – A local Midland City high school student who is killed playing football on Thanksgiving Day. George's **tombstone**, a towering sixty-two-foot obelisk with a football on top, is the largest in Midland City's cemetery. For years, The George Hickman Bannister law prohibited any structures taller than the obelisk to be built in Midland City, but the law is "junked" to allow for radio towers. The local high school fieldhouse and the theater are both named for Bannister as well, and while both buildings still stand, almost no one remembers the high school football player. George Hickman Bannister reflects Vonnegut's claim that in some cases, gone really does mean forgotten.

Gloria Browning – The cashier in the Service Department of Dwayne Hoover's Pontiac dealership. Gloria has a hysterectomy at the young age of twenty-five after a "botched abortion." She is terribly embittered and unhappy, and since she doesn't "have nerve enough to commit suicide," she sarcastically does "anything anybody says—in the service of mankind." Gloria serves as a cautionary tale for what happens when a woman's reproductive rights and freedoms are limited or taken away.

The Man – The main character in Kilgore Trout's novel, *Now It Can Be Told*. The Man, a test subject of the Creator of the Universe, is the only creature in a universe of "fully programmable robots" with free will and the "ability to make up his own mind." The Man represents Adam from the biblical story of creation, and because he has free will, the Creator never knows what he is going to say next. The Man's **tombstone** claims that "perhaps the Man was a better universe in its infancy," and this implies that Vonnegut believes the *idea* of humankind is better than the reality, which he views as destructive and greedy.

Bonnie MacMahon – The "white waitress" at the cocktail lounge in the Holiday Inn of Midland City. Bonnie lost all her money in a failed attempt to open a car wash in nearby Shepherdstown and now works at the Holiday Inn to make ends meet. She is a typical struggling blue-collar worker—she works hard for little pay and often despises her customers, but she smiles for the sake of tips. Bonnie gets into an altercation with Rabo Karabekian after he insults Mary Alice Miller, a local Midland City celebrity and Queen of the Arts Festival. Like several other innocent bystanders, Bonnie MacMahon is assaulted by Dwayne Hoover after he suffers a psychotic break and "runs amok" in Midland City.

Beatrice Keedsler – A "distinguished" Gothic novelist and native of Midland City. Beatrice is a guest at the Arts Festival in Midland City, although Vonnegut has little respect for her artistically. Vonnegut accuses Beatrice of "joining hands with other old-fashioned storytellers to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end." Beatrice represents traditional storytelling, the very thing Vonnegut vows to "shun."

Harold Newcomb Wilbur – Midland City's second most decorated war veteran and the bartender at the cocktail lounge in the Holiday Inn. Vonnegut fears that Harold will kick him out of the bar for acting suspicious, so he has Ned Lingamon, Midland City's most decorated war veteran, call Harold on the telephone from jail to create a diversion. Both Harold and Ned reflect Vonnegut's control over his characters, and he explicitly outlines their purpose and existence.

Ned Lingamon – Midland City's most decorated war veteran. Ned Lingamon is arrested for killing his own baby and uses his one phone call to call Harold Newcomb Wilbur, Midland City's second most decorated war veteran. Of course, Vonnegut only has Ned arrested so that he can make the phone call to Harold, the bartender at the cocktail lounge in the Holiday Inn, to create a distraction so that Vonnegut is not kicked out of the bar for acting suspicious.

Mary Alice Miller – The Queen of the Arts Festival and a local celebrity in Midland City. Mary Alice is an Olympic Gold Medalist and the Women's Two Hundred Meter Breast Stroke Champion of the World. Her father taught her to swim at just eight months old, and after Rabo Karabekian accuses her father of "turning her into an outboard motor," it starts a near-riot at the festival. Mary Alice Miller represents pride in Midland City, and when Rabo ridicules Mary Alice, he ridicules Midland City by extension and suggests "that their lives might be ridiculous" as well.

Milo Maritimo – The "beautiful young desk clerk" at the Holiday Inn in Midland City. Milo is the first to welcome Kilgore Trout to the Arts Festival in Midland City, and he has read all Kilgore's stories and novels available in Eliot Rosewater's personal library. Milo is a member of the infamous Maritimo crime family, although he appears to make his living on honest terms.

Eddie Key – The driver of the special ambulance known as *Martha* that responds to Dwayne Hoover's "rampage." Eddie is a

direct descendant of Francis Scott Key, the man who wrote the *Star-Spangled Banner*, and he knows the complete history of his ancestry, which includes "Africans, Indians, and white men." Eddie's connection to the national anthem positions him squarely as an American, and his unique family tree reflects the country's diversity.

Dwayne's Stepfather – The adoptive father of Dwayne Hoover, and the birth father of Lyle and Kyle Hoover. Dwayne's stepfather and stepmother were initially unable to have children of their own when their adoption of Dwayne "triggered" something inside of them "which made it possible for them to have children after all," which, Vonnegut claims, "is a common phenomenon." Dwayne's stepfather, originally named Hoobler from West Virginia, moved to Midland City during the First War World, and after finding a large community of black people with the last name Hoobler living there, he changes their family name to Hoover to avoid association with people of color. Dwayne's stepfather is a blatant racist, and he is the personification of racism in American society.

Gooz – The main character in Kilgore Trout's novel, *This Year's Masterpiece*. The novel takes place on a planet named Bagnialto, where a government official spins a wheel of chance once a year to determine the cast value of art. Gooz, a poor cobbler, **paints a picture of his cat**, and the wheel determines that the painting is worth the equivalent of one billion dollars on Earth. Gooz and his painting represent the subjectivity of art and the arbitrary way that art is often assigned value and worth.

Lottie Davis – Dwayne Hoover's "black servant." Dwayne admits that he likes Lottie well enough, although he prefers to talk to his dog instead. Lottie is one of several black characters in *Breakfast of Champions* who works in a service position, and together they represent the widespread exploitation of people of color in American society.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Khashdrahr Miasma – An emergency physician in Midland City from Bangladesh. Dr. Miasma is aboard the disaster response vehicle, *Martha*, that arrives after Dwayne Hoover "runs amok" in Midland City.

Vernon Garr – A mechanic at Dwayne Hoover's Pontiac dealership. Vern is married to Mary, who suffers from schizophrenia and believes that Vern wants to "turn her brains to plutonium."

Mary Garr – Vernon Garr's wife. Mary is a schizophrenic who believes her husband is "trying to turn her brains to plutonium." Mary Garr is evidence of how common mental illness in American society.

Grace LeSabre – Harry LeSabre's wife. Grace and Harry are "fabulously well-to-do," and while Harry works at Dwayne Hoover's Pontiac dealership, the LeSabres enjoyed a financial windfall after investing in Xerox stock. Grace convinces her husband to quit Dwayne's dealership and buy a condominium on Maui.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ART, SUBJECTIVITY, AND ABSURDITY

Kurt Vonnegut's satirical novel *Breakfast of Champions* follows Kilgore Trout, a little-known writer on his way to an arts festival in the American Midwest. The novel is best described as a form of anti-art, a creative expression that questions and rejects the traditional form and function of art. While the role of art and artists is often the topic of hot debate, art is generally understood as something beautiful or otherwise impactful that imparts a basic truth. In theory, art endows patrons with a deeper understanding of the world and society, which in turn brings "order to chaos." Vonnegut, however, argues "that there is no order in the world around us." Instead, he seeks to "bring chaos to order." Through the ironic, and often ridiculous, depiction of art and artists within *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut explores art's inherent value—or lack thereof—and effectively argues that art is subjective and often arbitrary.

Vonnegut's protagonist, Kilgore Trout, is anything but a typical artist. He values his privacy and cares very little if his writing is ever read. As such, when he is invited to speak at an arts festival in Midland City, he is convinced there must be some mistake. After all, no one has ever heard of Kilgore Trout. Despite being a prolific writer, Kilgore makes exactly "doodley-squat"—essentially nothing—from his art. Instead, he earns his living installing aluminum storm windows. He has written hundreds of novels and thousands of short stories, but he never tells his boss or coworkers that he is a writer. It seems that even Kilgore doesn't label himself as a real writer; he doesn't keep copies of any of his novels and stories, most of which are published in works of "hard-core pornography" in order "to give bulk to books and magazines of salacious pictures." When Kilgore wants to read one of his stories, he must comb through pornographic bookstores in New York to find one. Very few people have ever read Kilgore's work, and the pornographic pictures published next to his unrelated stories ensure that most people never will.

Kilgore and the masses both seem indifferent to his work, which begins to flesh out Vonnegut's idea that art isn't imbued with inherent value. Even though his art is worth very little to the masses, Kilgore is invited to the Arts Festival because his

one and only fan—a millionaire named Eliot Rosewater—makes a sizable donation to the Festival in exchange for Kilgore's invite. Not only that, but Rosewater must hire a private investigator to find Kilgore in the first place. Kilgore is "so invisible that the search cost eighteen thousand dollars." In sharp contrast from the masses' indifference or complete ignorance of Kilgore's art, and the fact that Kilgore makes "doodley-squat" from his artistic efforts, Rosewater sees Kilgore's art as so valuable that it's worth an eighteen-thousand-dollar search and a hearty donation. Rosewater's towering devotion to Kilgore's art further emphasizes that art's value is neither inherent nor universal. Instead, art is subjective: while some people find no meaning in Kilgore's written works, Rosewater finds masterpieces.

Although Rosewater's willingness to spend a small fortune on Kilgore's art may seem silly at best and terribly misguided at worst, Vonnegut suggests that such a situation is actually fairly common. *Breakfast of Champions* removes art from its pedestal to show that art is often absurd and meaningless, and arbitrarily assigned value by anyone with the status or money to do so. One of Kilgore's books, *This Year's Masterpiece*, takes place on a planet named Bagnialto where the worth of art is determined by spinning a wheel of chance. In the novel, a cobbler named Gooz **paints a picture of his cat**, and after "an unprecedented gush of luck on the wheel," the painting is deemed to be worth "the equivalent of one billion dollars on Earth."

Far from being a thoughtful consideration of the painting, the spinning wheel of chance is an absurd way to assign value to art, as it could not be any more random or hands off. Plus, the painting is implied to lack serious meaning—it's just a picture someone casually painted of their pet—and yet it's suddenly determined to be worth billions of dollars (far more than what even the most expensive works of art would ever sell for in real life). The wheel thus symbolizes and caricatures authority figures who have the power or money to declare what art is worth.

Back in the "real" world of *Breakfast of Champions*, when the Mildred Barry Memorial Center for the Arts purchases a painting from minimal artist Rabo Karabekian for fifty thousand dollars, it causes a scandal in town. Midland City is "outraged," Vonnegut writes, adding, "So am I." The painting is a large swath of green paint with a single stripe of orange reflective tape. "I've seen better pictures done by a five-year-old," says Bonnie MacMahon of Midland City. The residents of Midland City can't believe the center has paid so much for such a simple, and even juvenile, painting. Here, art is not only depicted as lacking inherent value—it's depicted as outright absurd. Vonnegut himself claims to have "no respect whatsoever for the creative works" of Karabekian and believes that the artist has "entered into a conspiracy with millionaires to make poor people feel stupid." To Vonnegut and the citizens of Midland City, Karabekian's "incomprehensible" art is about making money, not revealing truth or beauty or accomplishing any deeper purpose, which speaks to the broader idea that art is often meaningless and assigned value in an equally absurd way.

Ultimately, Vonnegut implies that art's meaning is completely subjective—open to interpretation and experience, that is—and its value is usually assigned in an arbitrary way. It's interesting that Vonnegut uses a literary art form (the novel) and an artistic movement (anti-art) to voice his critique of art. As the novel comes to a close, Vonnegut also voices his intentions to give up his art—fiction writing—as a means of "cleansing and renewing [him]self for the very different sorts of years to come." As Vonnegut "somersault[s] lazily and pleasantly though the void" after this startling admission, it seems to be his way of saying that art is perhaps not just arbitrary and subjective but also in need of reimagining for it to thrive in "the very different sorts of years to come."

PEOPLE AND MACHINES

Throughout Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut makes countless references to industrialization and repeatedly associates people with machinery. He reasons that some "machines" are made by their Creator—whoever that may be—to be women, some are made to be poor, some are made black, "and so on," and their lives are a direct result of whatever they are engineered to be. The idea of people as machines creates a certain emotional distance between people, which in turn allows for terrible things to occur, such as war and exploitation. "Why should I care what happens to machines?" Dwayne Hoover asks at one point, giving voice to the callousness of society at large. The "machines" in Breakfast of Champions are generally unable to fight their programming, but there remains a small part of each of them that can't be controlled—in other words, even though people seem programed to be this or that, they still have free will and have the capacity to change themselves and the world. Through his various depictions of humans as machines, Vonnegut argues that humankind needs to be reprogrammed to be more sensitive and empathetic—and Breakfast of Champions serves as a hard reset.

Dwayne Hoover, a mentally ill car salesman, is a prime example of the people-as-machines narrative in action. When faced with tragedy, Dwayne reverts to the idea that the people around him are mere machines, programmed to do one thing or another, which allows him to sidestep deep emotional pain. For Dwayne—and, it's implied, for many others—the people-as-machines narrative is a way to avoid grappling with difficult emotions. When Dwayne explains why his wife, Celia, committed suicide by drinking Drāno (a drain-cleaning chemical), he yells, "I'll tell you why: She was that kind of machine!" If Dwayne thinks of his wife as a machine who is programmed to kill herself, then he can avoid the painful

implications of her death—that she was a terribly unhappy woman who struggled deeply with her mental health.

Dwayne's birth mother receives similar treatment. When the novel first introduces Dwayne Hoover and reveals that he is adopted, Vonnegut describes Dwayne's birth mother as "a defective child-bearing machine. She destroyed herself automatically while giving birth to Dwayne." Here, Vonnegut seems to be explaining the way Dwayne thinks of his mother's tragic death: she did not die due to blood loss or negligent care; instead she was a robot that simply malfunctioned. While this perhaps makes it easier for Dwayne to bear, it's clearly not a healthy means of grappling with emotional pain—even as an adult, he still "[blows] up" in anger when anyone brings up adoption, which suggests that the people-as-machines narrative keeps people from wrestling with the painful emotions that desperately need to be faced.

Vonnegut further employs the analogy of people as machines to explain America's history with slavery and war. By examining the people-as-machines narrative through a historical and political lens, Vonnegut shows how thinking of people as machines rather than flesh-and-blood human beings makes atrocities easier to stomach and justify, but it also perpetuates those atrocities. Vonnegut writes that early Americans "used human beings for machinery, and, even after slavery was eliminated, because it was so embarrassing, they and their decedents continued to think of ordinary human beings as machines." In other words, the history of slavery is easier for white Americans to accept if slaves are considered functional machines rather than real people. Further, white Americans still cling to this mindset as a means to avoid facing how "embarrassing" it is that they so deeply dehumanized black people.

The people-as-machines mindset justifies atrocities and sustains them. Vonnegut even explains World War II in terms of machines, writing that it was "staged by robots so that Dwayne Hoover could give a free-willed reaction to such a holocaust." Dwayne, who is mentally ill, reads one of Kilgore's novels in which the reader is the only "non-robot" with free will in the universe, and he mistakes it for reality. Kilgore's novel—and Dwayne's newly adopted worldview—thus suggests that WWII soldiers and affected civilians aren't real human beings, which, like Vonnegut's reference to slavery, makes the countless atrocities and war crimes committed easier to accept.

Although Vonnegut paints a bleak picture of humankind through its reliance on the humans-as-machines narrative, he offers a glimmer of hope for overturning it. He argues that awareness of the simple but apparently much-ignored fact that people have free will—meaning that they are not actually machines—can help humankind gain empathy for one another and forge a productive path forward. At first, Vonnegut himself seems to cleave to the humans-as-machines mindset, as he describes himself inventing his characters just as an engineer designs a machine. As he introduces Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut writes, "I do know who invented Kilgore Trout. I did. I made him snaggle-toothed. I gave him hair, but I turned it white. I wouldn't let him comb it or go to a barber. I made him grow it long and tangled." Despite being "the Creator," however, Vonnegut admits that his control over his characters is limited. Since the characters are "such big animals," Vonnegut says, "there is inertia to overcome. It isn't as though I'm connected to them by steel wires. It is more as though I am connected to them by stale rubberbands." Vonnegut's characters take on a life of their own—almost like a form of free will—which affects Vonnegut's ability to "control" them.

Even though he's writing about fictional characters, this speaks to the broader idea that human beings are not mere machines and have thoughts and feelings of their own, which are worth respecting. In examining the way his characters grow into "people" in their own right, Vonnegut implicitly makes a call to action, encouraging readers to break the pattern of thinking of people as machines and instead remember that their peers are living, breathing human beings with their own ideas and desires.

RACE AND RACISM

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut vows to "clear [his] head of all the junk," and race and racism are at the top of his list of "junk" to be cleared. The result is a descriptive and forward, and often offensive, portrayal of race and racism in American society. "Color was everything," Vonnegut writes. Indeed, color *is* everything in *Breakfast of Champions*, and Vonnegut introduces nearly all characters in relation to color. Race determines where characters live, the jobs they work, and whether they will be inmates at the Adult Correctional Institution in town. While Vonnegut's representation of race and racism can be difficult to read, it clearly underscores the systemic and institutionalized racism present in American society, which is often just as offensive and forward. In this way, Vonnegut lays bare the ugliness of racism in America, and in doing so, advocates for social equality regardless of skin color.

People of color are frequently exploited in *Breakfast of Champions*, which highlights their exploitation in American society as well. The novel takes place in America and draws a clear connection between fiction and reality. This is apparent with the Sacred Miracle Cave, a tourist attraction owned by Dwayne Hoover and his twin stepbrothers, Kyle and Lyle, that boasts an old cave that was once used by runaway slaves after escaping the South. The story about the slaves, however, is fake. In fact, the Cave wasn't discovered until 1937, but Dwayne and his stepbrothers continue to tell the story to increase business and make money. In telling this fabricated story, the stepbrothers exploit people of color and capitalize on their painful history.

While Dwayne and his stepbrothers sell a fake story, an actual historical site depicting the true tragedy of human slavery is ignored and forgotten. When Dwayne happens across a "tremendous earth-moving machine" digging a massive hole in Midland City, he asks the "white workman" how many horsepower the machine has. The construction worker calls it "*The Hundred-Nigger Machine*," a reference, Vonnegut writes, "to a time when black men had done most of the heavy digging in Midland City." The workman callously uses a racial slur to describe the machine, which dehumanizes black people by conflating slaves with machinery. In this case, what the workman says both implicitly and explicitly highlights how pervasive racism is in America.

Furthermore, after Bonnie MacMahon, a waitress in the lounge of Dwayne's Holiday Inn, loses all her money when her husband opens up a car wash in nearby Shepherdstown, Vonnegut explains that the carwash fails because "car washes need cheap and plentiful labor, which means black labor—and there are no Niggers in Shepherdstown." This obvious reflection of racism implies that white people in Midland City want black people as laborers but not neighbors, and this once again denies their humanity. Furthermore, even Vonnegut himself uses a racial slur here that is not simply dialogue between characters. While this is offensive and shocking, that is exactly what he intends—to hold a **mirror** up to America and force Americans to confront their ugly reflection. Even though Vonnegut's characters are fictional and exist only in the world of the novel, these racist characters speak to the ugly reality of racism in America outside the confines of the novel as well.

Blatant racism runs rampant in Vonnegut's novel, and this too highlights the obvious racism present in American society. After Dwayne's stepfather is hit by a car, he is given a farm formerly owned by a freed slave in an out-of-court settlement. The farm's mortgage had recently been foreclosed by the local bank, and Dwayne's stepfather "contemptuously" refers to the place as a "God damn Nigger farm." Dwayne's stepfather doesn't even bother to hide his prejudice—one of the many examples Vonnegut uses to show how racism in America, though sometimes more underhanded and passive, is often glaring and unmistakable. When Dwayne's stepparents first come to Midland City from West Virginia, they change their last name from Hoobler to Hoover, on account of the large population of black people named Hoobler living in Midland City. "It is embarrassing," Dwayne's stepfather says. "Everybody up here naturally assumes Hoobler is a *Nigger* name." Aside from using an offensive racial slur, which squarely positions him as a racist, Dwayne's stepfather also displays overt racism by going so far as to change the family name so that neither he, nor any of his descendants, will have to be associated with black people.

Furthermore, when Francine Pelfko, Dwayne's secretary, suggests opening a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise near the Adult Correctional Facility, she does so because most of the inmates are black, and she assumes that their families would love to eat some fried chicken when they come to visit. "So you want me to open a Nigger joint?" Dwayne asks. Along with Dwayne's obvious racism, this reflects Francine's racism as well, in the form of her reference to stereotypes about black people and fried chicken. Again, the racism in *Breakfast in Champions* underscores the reality of racism in American society. It is impossible to ignore or gloss over racism in Vonnegut's novel, which, by extension, he argues is impossible to ignore in reality too.

Vonnegut says there is "nothing sacred" about anyone; "we are all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide." Vonnegut, a white man, does not believe himself to be superior for any reason. This opinion is reflected in the character of Wayne Hoobler, a black ex-convict and direct descendant of the Hooblers who previously owned Dwayne's family farm. "Our names are so close," Wayne says to Dwayne, "it's the good Lord telling us *both* what to do." Wayne's comment suggest that he has more in common with Dwayne than just their names. Dwayne and Wayne come from the same city—practically from the same farm—their only difference is how society views them. Ultimately, Dwayne realizes that "white robots are just like black robots, essentially, in that they are programmed to be whatever they are, to do whatever they do," and by extension, Vonnegut argues that American society is similarly programmed. By "throwing out" the injustice of racism in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut encourages others to do the same.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PLANET

Breakfast of Champions takes place on Earth, "a planet which is dying fast." As protagonist Kilgore Trout hitchhikes across the American Midwest, he is confronted by a barrage of pollution and waste. Vonnegut refers to Earth as a "poisonous, festering cheese," and he speaks pointedly about the depletion of the ozone layer. He claims the destruction of the planet is largely due to overpopulation and industrial pollution, which he further blames on greed, but Vonnegut's initial argument is clear: the planet is in serious trouble. Vonnegut's environmental message isn't particularly optimistic or encouraging; instead, he points a finger at humankind and shows little sympathy. *Breakfast of Champions* is Vonnegut's warning to the world of the environmental state of the planet, and even though he is convinced it is too late, it serves as an environmental call to action in which he urges readers to be more mindful of their own contribution to a dying planet.

Vonnegut claims that the planet is "being destroyed by manufacturing processes, and what is being manufactured is lousy, by and large." In other words, industrialization is ruining the planet, and for no good reason. This is clear in the

interactions between Kilgore and a truck driver who picks him up while hitchhiking. The driver used to enjoy hunting and fishing, but now it "breaks his heart" to see the state of marshes and meadows compared to how they must have looked just one hundred years before. "And when you think of the shit that most of the factories make—wash day products, catfood, pop—." To the trucker, it is hardly a fair trade; the forests have been cut and the streams are all contaminated, and the only thing they have to show for it is a choice between Pepsi and Coke.

The devastating effects of man-made pollution are also clear when the Sacred Miracle Cave, a tourist attraction owned by Dwayne Hoover and his twin stepbrothers, Kyle and Lyle, begins to fill with "some sort of industrial waste which forms bubbles as tough as ping-pong balls." The bubbles threaten to consume the Cave and ruin their business, so Kyle and Lyle open fire on them with Browning Automatic Shotguns. The bubbles "let loose a stink you wouldn't believe," similar to the smell of "athlete's foot." Vonnegut twice references athlete's foot in relation to environmental pollution, which directly points to humans as the cause of pollution; it is an undeniably human footprint left on the environment. What's more, the twins don't meet the problem in the cave head on. They address only the problem of the bubbles, and then absurdly shoot at them, which only compounds the issue. Lyle and Kyle care about the cave because they profit off it—not because they care about the environment—and this reflects those in American society who refuse to confront the deeper problem of environmental damage and instead treat only the symptoms.

Furthermore, when Kilgore wades through Sugar Creek, a small patch of running water in Midland City, it is horribly polluted by the industrial waste of Barrytron, a local factory. Incidentally, the waste floating in Sugar Creek, Vonnegut writes, is the same pollution "fucking up Sacred Miracle Cave." Manufactured products in *Breakfast of Champions* are often described as worthless, and they have a negative impact of the environment. Vonnegut thus implies that the cost of manufacturing laundry soap and carbonated beverages far outweighs its worth. Here, Midland City pays with the Sacred Miracle Cave and Sugar Creek, and Vonnegut emphatically implies that it is not worth it.

The people in *Breakfast of Champions* are aware that their planet is dying, yet they simply choose to ignore their contribution to environmental pollution. When Kilgore asks an aging coalminer how he feels about destroying the planet, he replies that he is "usually too tired to care." His life as a poor coalminer means that he has bigger, more immediate problems than pollution. He doesn't care about the environment because he is poor and overworked. The life of the coalminer reflects that of countless Americans—they are often too poor to worry about what environmental damage their job causes and are often just happy to have a job. They also may feel at once numbed to pollutions' effects and powerless to stop them.

Indeed, Kilgore tells the truck driver that a river over in Cleveland catches on fire yearly because it "is so polluted," but now he laughs at pollution. Ignoring a river that spontaneously bursts into flames seems impossible, but it has become so commonplace that Kilgore has no other response. Kilgore continues, "When some tanker accidentally dumps its load in the ocean, and kills millions of birds and billions of fish, I say, 'More power to Standard Oil,' or whoever it was that dumped it. […] Up your ass with Mobil gas." While Kilgore's comment is obviously sarcastic, it is nonetheless true. Gasoline and other fossil fuels are burned without thought or concern in *Breakfast of Champions*, and Dwayne's Pontiac dealership is just the tip of the automotive iceberg in Midland City. Using Kilgore as a mouthpiece, Vonnegut highlights how many people choose apathy when it comes to environmental issues, believing that they might as well continue to harm the planet since it's so far gone.

Ultimately, Vonnegut argues that the characters in *Breakfast of Champions* know full well that their actions are harming the environment, but this does little to change their behavior. Thus, he maintains that they deserve their planet's rotting condition. While Vonnegut's call to environmental action is more commonplace in the twenty-first century, in 1971 when his book was written, it wasn't quite as popular. Vonnegut argues that all choices have environmental consequences, and this message becomes particularly significant in modern times, where new and future generations don't shoulder the same blame for the urgent condition of the Earth.

CAPITALISM AND CONSUMERISM

As Vonnegut "throws out" social injustices in *Breakfast of Champions*, he talks specifically "about the distribution of wealth" in American society and even speaks of his own poverty during the Great Depression. At one point in the novel, Vonnegut's protagonist, Kilgore Trout, meets the Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, in a grocery store, but he doesn't know who he is. Vonnegut claims that due to "peculiar laws on that part of the planet," the Governor is "allowed to own vast areas of Earth's surface, and the petroleum and other valuable minerals underneath the surface, as well." It has always been this way—the Governor "had been born into that cockamamie proprietorship." *Breakfast of Champions* revolves around capitalism and consumerism, and Vonnegut blames both for the state of the planet's economic and social inequality. He draws attention to this grim reality through Kilgore's stories as well as his own. With his sarcastic portrayal of capitalism and consumerism in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut underscores America's own economic inequality and advocates for a more just distribution of wealth.

Breakfast of Champions is rife with caricatures of capitalism. The characters are either "fabulously well-to-do" or have nothing, and the rich care little about the poor. With something like

twenty different businesses under his belt, Dwayne Hoover is perhaps the novel's clearest caricature of the greed and excess that underpin capitalism, as he appears to be fueled by the possibility of ever-more profits. In addition to a Pontic dealership, several vacant lots, and a portion of the new Holiday Inn, Dwayne owns "three Burger Chefs, too, and five coin-operated car washes, and pieces of the Sugar Creek Drive-In Theatre, Radio Station WMCY, the Three Maples Par-Three Golf Course, and seventeen hundred shares of common stock in Barrytron, Limited, a local electronics firm." Notably, Dwayne's personal greed is reflected by the company he owns so much stock in: Barrytron, Limited, which has a long history in Midland City. Before it was Barrytron, the company was known as The Robo-Magic Corporation of America and manufactured the very first automatic washing machine during the Great Depression. No one could afford one of course, but the company still advertised on the city's only billboard, further reflecting the company's greed; it will take money from anyone, even those who have little. Dwayne isn't happy with just one business, and the Robo-Magic company has no problem selling a product to people who can't afford it. In this way, Vonnegut emphasizes the moral shortcomings of American capitalism.

While Vonnegut argues the damaging effects of capitalism and consumerism in general, he isolates the private ownership of land in particular as the cause of many of society's inequalities and injustices. Kilgore writes a story called "This Means You," in which the entirety of the Hawaiian Islands is owned by only forty people. The property owners "decide to exercise their property rights to the full," and they place "no trespassing signs" everywhere. Since "the law of gravity requires that they stick somewhere on the surface" of the earth, the government gives each Hawaiian citizen a helium balloon to float in, so they can "go on inhabiting the islands without always sticking to things other people owned." Since all the island is privately owned, there is literally nowhere for the citizens to exist and live. Kilgore's story serves as a cautionary tale—the excessive desires of a greedy few leave an entire island of people homeless.

In addition to exploring the private ownership of land, Vonnegut also focuses on natural resources, such as coal and oil. When Kilgore meets an old man in West Virginia who has seen his entire state torn apart by coal companies, he laments the laws that make such a thing possible. Companies have the right to own minerals under the ground, and what is on top is usually "another man's farm or woods or house." Whenever a company wants to get to what they own, they have "a right to wreck what's on top to get at it. The rights of the people on top of the ground don't amount to nothing compared to the rights of the man who owns what's underneath." In other words, the law favors the wealthy, who are made that way through greed and capitalism, often at the expense of others.

Vonnegut's portrayal of the private ownership of land and resources is at times outlandish, but it nevertheless draws important parallels to current economical injustices and inequalities in American society. Vonnegut argues that corporate greed has indeed resulted in the stripping of a vast amounts of irreplaceable countryside, has compounded the world's environmental crisis, and adds considerably to poverty and the nation's unequal distribution of wealth. Vonnegut's novel does not end on a positive note as far as the distribution of wealth is concerned, and he doesn't imply that the problem will end any time soon. Instead, he brings plenty of awareness to the problem, in the hope that it will improve in the future. Vonnegut argues a more ethical approach to capitalism and consumerism, one that is not fueled by greed and injustice. Ironically, the only way to correct the evils of capitalism is through consumerism, or rather the lack of it. When Americans stop doing business with and buying products from unethical companies, they will begin to strip them of their capitalist power and, effectively, begin the redistribution of wealth.

MENTAL HEALTH

After Dwayne Hoover's wife, Celia, who incidentally is "crazy as a bedbug," commits suicide by drinking Drāno (a drain-cleaning chemical), Dwayne begins to struggle with his own mental health. The stress of his wife's death, in addition to his homosexual son, Bunny's, revelation that he is really a woman, causes Dwayne to completely take leave of his senses, and he spirals into insanity, lashing out violently at his son and other innocent citizens of Midland City. Dwayne has "bats in his bell tower," Vonnegut explains. "He is off his rocker. He isn't playing with a full deck of cards." Dwayne's insanity progresses slowly, and while he presents with plenty of warning signs, they go largely ignored in Midland City. Vonnegut suggests that Dwayne's community is complicit in the violence resulting from his mental breakdown, and he portrays mental illness as a widespread epidemic affecting nearly everyone in town. Dwayne and his wife are not the only characters in *Breakfast of Champions* suffering with mental illness in one form or another, and suicide is a common occurrence. In this way, Vonnegut highlights the prevalence of mental illness in American society, and argues the importance of recognizing warning signs, which all too often are ignored or minimalized.

Breakfast of Champions is riddled with portrayals of mental illness, and they are far from gentle. In the beginning of the novel, Vonnegut mentions that men with syphilis were "common spectacles in downtown Indianapolis and in circus crowds" when he was a boy. Their brains "were infested with carnivorous little corkscrews which could be seen only with a microscope," and these corkscrews caused them to behave very strangely.

Vernon Garr, one of the employees in Dwayne's Pontiac dealership, has a wife, Mary, who suffers from schizophrenia.

Mary frequently hallucinates and thinks that Vernon is "trying to turn her brains into plutonium." Bunny, who lives the life of a depressed hermit in a "flophouse" on Midland's City's "Skid Row," responds "so grotesquely" to his father's psychotic break that there is "talk of putting [him] in the booby hatch, too." Vonnegut's repeated references to mental illness underscores the frequency with which mental disorders occur in American society. There are very few characters who are not in some way touched by mental illness, and the same can be said for mainstream society as well.

As Dwayne begins to go insane, no one in his life pays much attention, and many people don't even seem to notice, highlighting the common impulse to avoid sensitive topics like mental health. For example, although Dwayne is typically a kind and generous employer and friend, his long-time employee, Harry LeSabre, barely says a word when Dwayne attacks him out of the blue for wearing drab clothing. Dwayne threatens to fire Harry because of his boring neckties, and while this behavior is out of character for Dwayne, Harry tells no one, expect his wife, Grace, and Francine, Dwayne's secretary. As a symptom of his insanity, Dwayne also develops echolalia, a condition that causes him to repeat the last words of every sentence spoken to him. Dwayne goes all over town repeating people and no one says a word about it.

It is only after Dwayne's insanity culminates in a violent outburst in which he beats Bunny's face into the keys a baby grand piano, that people claim to be "furious with themselves for not noticing the danger signals in Dwayne's behavior, for ignoring his obvious cries for help." The local newspaper publishes a "deeply sympathetic editorial" entitled "A Cry For Help," which implores people "to watch each other for danger signals." Midland City is appropriately concerned, but it is too late. Vonnegut argues that instead of watching Dwayne unravel and later commenting on it, if others had simply offered Dwayne some help, his breakdown may have been avoided.

Vonnegut furthers draws attention to mental illness when he writes of his personal struggles with mental health problems. Vonnegut claims that while Bunny's mother drinks Drāno, his own mother had committed suicide years earlier by an overdose of sleeping pills, "which wasn't nearly as horrible," he says. Though Vonnegut's novel is fictional, this is a true detail from the author's life. Thus mental illness and suicide aren't simply tropes in Vonnegut's novel; they are rooted in his own life experiences.

Near the end of the novel, Vonnegut begins talking to himself and says, "this is a very bad book you're writing." Vonnegut replies, "I know." He then tells himself: "You're afraid you'll kill yourself the way your mother did." He answers, "I know." Vonnegut is quite literally having a conversation with himself, which suggests that he isn't well, but it also implies that he needs to talk about his mental health. In the absence of an actual person, he talks to himself. Sitting in a bar with the characters of *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut repeats the word "schizophrenia" to himself over and over again. The word has "fascinated" Vonnegut for years. He claims that he "did not and does not know for certain that he has this disease," but he certainly makes himself "hideously uncomfortable" by not believing "what his neighbors believe." Vonnegut's willingness to disclose his own struggles with mental illness lends increased weight to his argument that mental illness is common and pernicious in American society.

In a way, Vonnegut himself reaches out for help, and he implies that his own illness goes far beyond occasional suicidal ideations. Vonnegut talks about little white pills that a doctor tells him to "take in moderation, two a day, in order not to feel blue," which implies he needs daily medication to treat his own mental illness and function normally in society. *Breakfast of Champions* is Vonnegut's attempt to destigmatize mental illness by acknowledging the realty and prevalence of mental disorders.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MIRRORS

Vonnegut repeatedly mentions mirrors in *Breakfast of Champions*, which represent a portal to another universe. Kilgore Trout refers to mirrors as "leaks" and likes to pretend that they are "holes between two universes," which he often warns young children not to get to close to. Kilgore tells people that in Bermuda, where he comes from, the expression "I have to take a leak" means that one is "about to steal a mirror." Kilgore tells this story to a truck driver, and a week later the man tells his wife, who then proceeds to tell all her friends. Kilgore's story about taking a leak in Bermuda reflects his theory that ideas, good or bad, will eventually spread and permeate society.

Kilgore's playful belief that mirrors represent holes between universes is also reflected throughout much of the book. Sugar Creek, the polluted stream that flows through the flatlands of Midland City, occasionally floods, and when it does, it "forms a vast mirror in which children might safely play." In this instance, the mirror formed on the surface of Sugar Creek is a hole into another universe where the environment isn't so badly polluted that dead fish float on the surface of streams and plastic waste hardens on the skin of anyone who dares to wade in the water.

Mirrors also cover the walls and surfaces in the lobby of the Holiday Inn when Kilgore first arrives. These "leaks" separate the cultured and sophisticated world of the Arts Festival and Kilgore's blue-collar life as a storm window installer. Lastly,

when Vonnegut himself goes to the Holiday Inn to watch the meeting between Kilgore and Dwayne Hoover, his own mirrored sunglasses are "leaks" that allow him to see out into the universe of his literary creation, but when his characters look at him, all they see is their own reflection.

TOMBSTONES

Tombstones, like **mirrors**, are repeatedly mentioned in *Breakfast of Champions*, and while they are certainly symbolic of death, they also represent Vonnegut's preoccupation with the idea of being "gone but not forgotten." Vonnegut mentions Kilgore's tombstone and even includes a picture, and he does the same for The Man, the fictional character in one of Kilgore's novels. These characters are remembered by way of their tombstones, but this is not always the case.

George Hickman Bannister, a local teenage boy who is killed during a high school football game, has the largest tombstone in Midland City—a towering sixty-two-foot obelisk. Midland City also dedicates a fieldhouse and a movie theater to George's memory, but just a few years after his death, no one in Midland City remembers who George Hickman Bannister was anymore. In George's case, it seems, gone really *does* mean forgotten, and Vonnegut implies that he fears the same fate. He constantly mentions what is written on this tombstone and that tombstone, and even the arts center in Midland City is dedicated in memory of Mildred Barry, a well-known, and now deceased, citizen of Midland City. Tombstones in *Breakfast of Champions* represent an attempt at immortality—the continuation of life through the memories of others—but like most things in Vonnegut's novel, this attempt can be futile and is certainly not guaranteed.

PAINTINGS

Paintings in *Breakfast of Champions* symbolize art's subjectivity and arbitrariness. When Eliot Rosewater wants Kilgore Trout to speak at the upcoming Arts Festival in Midland City, Rosewater convinces the chairman of the festival to invite Kilgore by offering to loan his three million dollar El Greco painting to the festival. When Rosewater offers the painting to Midland City in exchange for Kilgore, this implies that Kilgore's writing is worth a comparable amount. Of course, Kilgore's writing isn't worth anything to the masses, but to Rosewater, it is worth about three million dollars. Another example comes from Kilgore's novel, *This Year's Masterpiece*, when a government official spins a wheel of chance each year to determine the cash value of art. Gooz, a local cobbler, paints a picture of his cat, and it is determined to be worth over one billion dollars. The government later discovers that the wheel is rigged, but Vonnegut's point is clear—the value and meaning of art is subjective, and often determined in completely arbitrary ways. Furthermore, when the Arts Center in Midland City pays Rabo Karabekian fifty thousand dollars for his simple and childish painting, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, the entire town is outraged. Citizens of Midland City can't believe that the center has paid so much for the painting when they have "seen better pictures done by a five-year-old." Through Karabekian's painting, Vonnegut implies that art is often lacking inherent value and is, at times, downright absurd. To Midland City, Karabekian's painting doesn't serve a deeper purpose, such as revealing truth or beauty, and it is simply about making money. In this way, Vonnegut argues art's subjectivity and implies that art is often meaningless and assigned value in completely arbitrary, and often absurd, ways.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dial Press edition of *Breakfast of Champions* published in 2011.

Preface Quotes

I think I am trying to clear my head of all the junk in there—the assholes, the flags, the underpants. Yes—there is a picture in this book of underpants. I'm throwing out characters from my other books, too. I'm not going to put on any more puppet shows.

I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago.

I suspect that this is something most white Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans, should do. The things other people have put into *my* head, at any rate, do not fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very beginning of the novel and effectively explains *Breakfast of Champions*. By clearing his head of "junk," Vonnegut metaphorically rejects and disposes of all the things in American society that outrage him, including environmental pollution. Vonnegut's environmental message is reflected in his attempt to wipe his mind as clean as the day he was "born onto the damaged planet," and he carries this message throughout the novel. Vonnegut also disposes of racism and capitalism, and this

too is reflected in his opinion that emptying one's mind "is something most white Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans, should do." In this way, Vonnegut implores white America and the wealthy to stop and look around, and the world he depicts is ugly.

Vonnegut's heavy critique of society is in large part what makes his novel postmodern, and so is his use of intertextuality, or the weaving of other texts into another piece of writing. Here, Vonnegut vows to "throw out characters from [his] other books, too," and indeed many of his characters appear in his other works as well. By reusing his own characters, Vonnegut metaphorically "throws out" the people who perpetuate the social injustices and irritations he attempts to dismantle, but more importantly, Vonnegut "throws out" his own art. He ultimately argues that art is subjective and meaningless, but is nevertheless placed on a pedestal in society, and by throwing it out as "junk," he implies that it shouldn't be taken quite so seriously. Of course, Vonnegut relays many serious messages and he does it though his novel, a form of art, but this doesn't mean readers should take it as "junk." Vonnegut expects readers to apply a critical eye to his novel, and if needed, change their behavior accordingly.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The motto of Dwayne Hoover's and Kilgore Trout's nation was this, which meant in a language nobody spoke anymore, *Out of Many, One: "E pluribus unum."*

The undippable flag was a beauty, and the anthem and the vacant motto might not have mattered much, if it weren't for this: a lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made. It might have comforted them some if their anthem and their motto had mentioned fairness or brotherhood or hope or happiness, had somehow welcomed them to the society and its real estate.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Kilgore Trout, Dwayne Hoover

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Vonnegut is introducing the United States of America, the country in which Dwayne and Kilgore live, which is developed but terribly unequal and unjust. Vonnegut has just claimed that the nation's national anthem is nonsensical "balderdash," and he suggests that the country's motto isn't much better. This quote implies that no one really understands the motto, so it is fitting that it is written in a dead language that people no longer speak. The "undippable flag," which by law cannot be dipped, or lowered, to any person or thing, commands respect, but Vonnegut implies that the nation doesn't much respect its people.

Vonnegut suggests that the ridiculous and meaningless anthem and motto might be excusable if so many people weren't treated so badly, and Vonnegut highlights many of those people in his novel. In Dwayne and Kilgore's America, the mentally ill are neglected, the poor are left to fend for themselves and sometimes starve, and people of color are exploited and abused. The nation's motto, "Out of Many, One," connotes an image of the social hierarchy, and at the top are those who are white, wealthy, and of sound mind and body. Everyone else scrambles for the scraps left behind, and therefore they believe "some terrible mistake had been made."

❝ The teachers told the children that [1492] was when their continent was discovered by human beings. Actually, millions of human beings were already living full and imaginative lives on the continent in 1492. That was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them.

Here was another piece of evil nonsense which children were taught: that the sea pirates eventually created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Vonnegut continues his introduction and explanation of America, and it sets the stage for the racism that pervades most of the novel. It is frequently taught in American schools that the continent was discovered in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. Columbus brought with him violence and rape, and a deep prejudice that lives on into present day, but teachers usually leave that part out. Vonnegut's use of the words "discovered by human beings" suggests that the continent didn't exist before Columbus's

arrival, and the use of "human beings" implies that those already living there were somehow not human, or at least less than human. Vonnegut points out that native inhabitants were in fact human, and that their lives were "full and imaginative," and worth living.

Vonnegut attempts to correct the common misconception about the year 1492 by pointing out what Columbus really came to do: "cheat and rob and kill." Vonnegut's reference to America's Founding Fathers, or "the sea pirates" who "eventually created a government," clearly labels them as racists too. He criticizes their country meant to be a "beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere," which is to say that it is not a "beacon of freedom" to many people. The slaves brought to the nation in shackles weren't free, and even after the abolishment of slavery, black men like Wayne Hoobler are still imprisoned and stripped of their rights and dignity. Vonnegut argues that teaching school children a watered-down and sanitized version of the "discovery" of America only perpetuates the cruelty and racism that began in 1492.

❝ A lot of the people on the wrecked planet were *Communists*. They had a theory that what was left of the planet should be shared more or less equally among all the people, who hadn't asked to come to a wrecked planet in the first place. Meanwhile, more babies were arriving all the time—kicking and screaming, yelling for milk.

In some places people would actually try to eat mud or suck on gravel while babies were being born just a few feet away.

And so on.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Vonnegut is explaining the social and political nature of Earth, the planet on which Kilgore and Dwayne live, and his description also offers powerful insight into the environmental state of the planet as well. Vonnegut has just explained that America, where Dwayne and Kilgore live, is a capitalist country—meaning the economical system is based on industry and free trade—a stark difference from the communism he describes here. Vonnegut very clearly criticizes capitalism and implies that it leads to excessive greed and pollution, but he doesn't seem to think that communism is the answer to the evils of capitalism either.

Vonnegut frequently points to overpopulation as a major factor in the destruction of the planet, and this quote implies the same. He twice calls the planet "wrecked," suggesting that it is so polluted and destroyed that it can't be corrected, and he indicates that the resources are dwindling as people "eat mud or suck on gravel." Everything must be shared in a communist society, but the ever-growing population means that the already limited resources are stretched thin. Here, the children are born hungry, "kicking and screaming, yelling for milk," and the rest of their lives will be much of the same. Vonnegut's repeated motif, the words "and so on," imply that this process will continue, on and on, until the end of time. This quote makes plain the social, economic, and environmental injustices of Dwayne and Kilgore's planet, which reflect the injustices of the real world as well.

❝ It shook up Trout to realize that even *he* could bring evil into the world—in the form of bad ideas. And, after Dwayne was carted off to a lunatic asylum in a canvas camisole, Trout became a fanatic on the importance of ideas as causes and cures for diseases.

But nobody would listen to him. He was a dirty old man in the wilderness, crying out among the trees and underbrush, "Ideas or the lack of them can cause disease!"

Related Characters: Kilgore Trout, Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Dwayne Hoover

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Vonnegut informs the reader that Dwayne will be driven crazy by one of Kilgore's books and go on a public "rampage," and it introduces Kilgore's theory of ideas as the cause and cure for disease. Vonnegut argues that mental illness is only half "chemicals" and physiology, the other half is "bad ideas," which he claims gives insanity "shape and form." Dwayne gets his "bad ideas" from Kilgore's book, and several people are injured as a result. While Dwayne is an obvious example of ideas causing disease, Vonnegut himself is cured by an idea when he is transformed by Rabo Karabekian's painting of "an unwavering band of light."

Vonnegut's description of Kilgore as "a dirty old man in the wilderness" is highly ironic. When Kilgore is invited to the

Arts Festival, he vows to arrive as "the dirtiest of old men" to shock and repulse the city. He wants to be treated badly, and he goes to great lengths to make himself old and dirty. Here, Kilgore finally gets his wish, but no one is listening anymore. Of course, Kilgore is eventually heard and ultimately revered for his work in the field of mental health. Upon his death, Kilgore is honored with a monument that reads: "We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane." Through Kilgore's theory of ideas and disease, Vonnegut implies that a society full of "bad ideas," such as racism and unfettered capitalism and greed, will never be healthy or humane.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"They don't want anything but smilers out there," Trout said to his parakeet. "Unhappy failures need not apply." But his mind wouldn't leave it alone at that. He got an idea which he found very tangy: "But maybe an unhappy failure *is* exactly what they *need* to see."

He became energetic after that. "Bill, Bill—" he said, "listen, I'm leaving the cage, but I'm coming back. I'm going out there to show them what nobody has ever seen at an arts festival before: a representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty—and didn't find doodley-squat!"

Related Characters: Kilgore Trout (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kilgore has just been invited to speak at the Arts Festivals in Midland City. He doesn't initially wish to go, but he ultimately decides to crash the festival, and this decision places the entire novel in motion. Additionally, this quote reflects Kilgore's sad life as a failed writer, which is reflected in the fact that he only has his pet parakeet to talk to. He assumes that the festival will be full of distinguished and accomplished artists, and his own work is generally ignored and used to add "bulk" to pornographic books and magazines. Kilgore doesn't consider himself a real artist, he doesn't even get paid for his writing, and he doesn't think he belongs anywhere near an arts festival. He figures that he will only embarrass himself if he goes, but he is hoping to embarrass the festival instead.

Kilgore wants Midland City to be mortified that they have invited such a failure to speak at their festival, and in doing so, he hopes to cheapen the image of art that they hold so dear. He is determined to prove to them that there is no truth or beauty to be found in the world—after all, his own search has turned up "doodley-squat." As art is a product of society, Kilgore's fruitless search for truth and beauty implies that there isn't any to found in the world, and the ugliness depicted by Vonnegut throughout *Breakfast of Champions* confirms this.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Dwayne stayed in his vacant lot for a while. He played the radio. All the Midland City stations were asleep for the night, but Dwayne picked up a country music station in West Virginia, which offered him ten different kinds of flowering shrubs and five fruit trees for six dollars, C.O.D.

"Sounds good to me," said Dwayne. He meant it. Almost all the messages which were sent and received in his country, even the telepathic ones, had to do with buying or selling some damn thing. They were like lullabies to Dwayne.

Related Characters: Dwayne Hoover, Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Dwayne suffers an acute bout of insanity and crashes his car into a vacant parking lot. While this quote obviously reflects Dwayne's mental illness, it also underscores the idea that people are essentially machines who are programmed in one way or another by society to be and do certain things. Here, America's capitalist society is actively programming Dwayne to buy more goods through media and advertising. Dwayne doesn't need "ten different kinds of flower shrubs and five fruit trees," but he wants them, and he is willing to pay "six dollars, C.O.D," or cash on delivery, to have them. It's also significant that these advertisements are "like lullabies to Dwayne," because it suggests that they have a hypnotic quality; consumerism, Vonnegut implies, is mindless, inexplicable, and irresistible. Dwayne serves as the personification of capitalist greed in the novel, and the advertisements, "like lullabies," are music to his ears. The idea of buying something has a calming effect on Dwayne, and it allows him to calm himself and gather some semblance of sanity. With this quote, Vonnegut underscores the power and pervasiveness of advertising in America's capitalist society. This needless buying is what fuels Dwayne's capitalist society, and Vonnegut argues that

it is also what's destroying it. Mass pollution from countless factories is killing the environment, and while the constant urge to buy and sell has made many people like Dwayne rich, it has also left a disproportionate number of people in poverty and despair.

Chapter 10 Quotes

[The truck driver] had a point. The planet was being destroyed by manufacturing processes, and what was being manufactured was lousy, by and large.

Then Trout made a good point, too. "Well," he said, "I used to be a conservationist. I used to weep and wail about people shooting bald eagles with automatic shotguns from helicopters and all that, but I gave it up. There's a river in Cleveland which is so polluted that it catches fire about once a year. That used to make me sick, but I laugh about it now. When some tanker accidently dumps its load in the ocean, and kills millions of birds and billions of fish, I say, 'More power to Standard Oil,' or whoever it was that dumped it." Trout raised his arms in celebration. "'Up your ass with Mobil gas,'" he said.

Related Characters: Kilgore Trout, Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), The Truck Driver

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kilgore hitches a ride with a truck driver on his way to Midland City. The driver used to be an avid hunter and fisherman, but the pollution from numerous factories has wrecked the forests and streams. With this quote, Vonnegut laments the deteriorated state of the environment and emphatically implies that it isn't worth it. Manufacturing processes have taken over the country with their goods and pollution, and to make matters worse, the products they produce aren't even that good. Kilgore's claim that he "used to be a conservationist" implies that while he did care about the environment at one time, things have gotten so bad that he has since thrown up his hands.

The image of "people shooting bald eagles with automatic shotguns from helicopters" is both disturbing and absurd, and it underscores how far gone the country is as far as the environment is concerned. Bald eagles, an endangered species and the symbol of America's freedom, are gunned down without remorse, and the rivers are so polluted that they spontaneously burst into flames. The sarcastic way in which Kilgore scoffs as oil is dumped into the ocean is obviously meant to be satirical, but it is not far off from society's actual response to pollution. Most people continue driving gas-guzzling cars and buying gas and oil even when it spills into oceans and destroys ecosystems, which essentially excuses and allows the pollution to continue. In this way, Kilgore represents those in American society who acknowledge pollution and the danger it poses to the planet but figure it is too late to fix it.

Chapter 11 Quotes

The young man went back to burnishing the automobile. His life was not worth living. He had a feeble will to survive. He thought the planet was terrible, that he never should have been sent there. Some mistake had been made. He had no friends or relatives. He was put in cages all the time.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Young Black Man / Wayne Hoobler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Vonnegut introduces Wayne Hoobler, a black ex-convict from Midland City, and it reflects his life in America's racist and unjust society. Wayne has just been released from prison, and he is polishing the cars in Dwayne's parking lot hoping to land a job. As a black man in America, Wayne has lived a sad life—he was orphaned early on and spent time in juvenile homes before finally going to prison—and his future holds little promise. Society has marginalized him and given him very little opportunity to succeed, which has resulted in his "feeble will to survive." Wayne is one of the ignored, cheated, and insulted American citizens Vonnegut mentions in the beginning of the book, and just like them, Wayne is convinced that he is in the wrong place. The "cages" Wayne is put into is a reference to prison, and in this way, Vonnegut implies that black men in America are criminalized and institutionalized. Society has convinced everyone that black men are criminals who belong in prison, which has led to their mass incarceration. This quote highlights Wayne's plight and exposes the racist society that sidelines and degrades him.

"Our names are so close," said the young man, "it's the good Lord telling us *both* what to do."

Dwayne Hoover didn't ask him what his name was, but the young man told him anyway, radiantly: "My name, sir, is Wayne Hoobler."

All around Midland City, Hoobler was a common Nigger name.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut, Young Black Man / Wayne Hoobler (speaker), Dwayne Hoover

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Wayne Hoobler is meeting Dwayne Hoover for the first time. Wayne and Dwayne operate as foils of one another: Wayne is a black ex-convict whose life is full of oppression and discrimination, while Dwayne is a rich white man who lives a life of wealth and luxury. As foils, Dwayne and Wayne's differences are more than apparent, but Vonnegut carefully points out their similarities as well. When Wayne notes how close their names are and says "it's the good Lord telling [them] *both* what to do," this suggests that God is drawing attention to the fact that they are both human beings who deserve respect.

Of course, Dwayne *doesn't* respect Wayne, and this is clear when Dwayne doesn't even bother to ask his name. Dwayne is indifferent to Wayne because, as a racist white man, he considers himself superior to the black ex-convict, and this discrimination is clear in Vonnegut's callous use of a racial slur as well. It is important to note that Vonnegut's use of a highly offensive racial slur is not part of the dialogue, and it does not represent another's words. Vonnegut himself perpetuates the hatred that has plagued Wayne's entire life, and it is impossible to ignore. Vonnegut's use of this hateful word mirrors the racism that is rampant in American society, which is just as obvious and ugly. When Wayne "radiantly" tells Dwayne his name, this implies that Wayne has pride in who he is, despite society's degrading treatment of him.

Chapter 14 Quotes

The surface of West Virginia, with its coal and trees and topsoil gone, was rearranging what was left of itself in conformity with the laws of gravity. It was collapsing into all the holes which had been dug into it. Its mountains, which had once found it easy to stand by themselves, were sliding into valleys now.

The demolition of West Virginia had taken place with the approval of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the State Government, which drew their power from the people.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Kilgore Trout

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Kilgore drives through West Virginia on his way to Midland City, and it highlights Vonnegut's central argument that industry and manufacturing are destroying the planet. Here, West Virginia has been completely devastated in the pursuit of coal and other natural resources, and the state has been left to "collapse" and fall to pieces. Vonnegut's words conjure images of massive gaping holes where the valuable rocks have been stripped from the earth, creating large areas of unstable land that threatens to swallow the mountains. What once was beautiful and vibrant land has been sacrificed for profit, and now that it's gone, all signs of life are gone as well.

Vonnegut is quick to point out that the federal government has "approved" the stripping and destruction of West Virginia, and since the government is empowered by "the people," society has no one to blame but themselves for the damaged condition of their planet. In this way, Vonnegut has little sympathy for humankind—as the people have allowed their planet to be ruined, Vonnegut argues that they deserve its crumbling condition. The sad state of West Virginia mirrors that of countless other abandoned mining operations throughout the United States, where a thoughtless quest for fuel and profits have left much of the country in ruin.

"That was the *last* story I ever read," said the driver. "My God—that must be all of fifteen years ago. The story was about another planet. It was a crazy story. They had museums full of paintings all over the place, and the government used a kind of roulette wheel to decide what to put in the museums, and what to throw out."

Related Characters: The Truck Driver (speaker), Kilgore Trout

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the truck driver that has picked up Kilgore tells him about a strange story he read years ago in jail. The story, which happens to have been written by Kilgore himself, highlights the subjectivity of art. The paintings that are selected to hang in the museum via the wheel have nothing to do with talent, beauty, or any kind of deeper meaning—they are selected and given value in a completely random way. The driver's description of the story as "crazy" is certainly fitting. Determining which pieces of art are worth keeping and displaying simply by spinning a wheel is arbitrary and ridiculous; however, Vonnegut implies that art is often given value in equally absurd ways outside the confines of Kilgore's novel.

The jailhouse where the driver read the story used paper from old books and magazines as toilet paper, and he came across the story one day while wiping. Obviously, Kilgore's own art is worth very little, yet his one and only fan, Eliot Rosewater, pays an obscene amount of money to ensure that Kilgore is invited to the arts festival. What was worth so little to the driver's jailhouse as to be used in lieu of toilet paper is worth over three million dollars to Rosewater. Besides emphasizing how the value and meaning one gleans from art is totally subjective, Kilgore's story and the fact that it was used as toilet paper implies that art does not have inherent or universal value. While Kilgore's own work is not judged based on a "roulette wheel," it is valued in an equally random and absurd way.

Chapter 15 Quotes

It didn't matter much what Dwayne said. It hadn't mattered much for years. It didn't matter much what most people in Midland City said out loud, except when they were talking about money or structures or travel or machinery—or other measurable things. Every person had a clearly defined part to play—as a black person, a female high school drop-out, a Pontiac dealer, a gynecologist, a gas-conversion burner installer. If a person stopped living up to expectations, because of bad chemicals or one thing or another, everybody went on imagining that the person was living up to expectations anyway.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Dwayne Hoover

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Dwayne is struck with echolalia, a symptom of his insanity that compels him to repeat whatever is said to him, and he fears his insanity will be discovered. Of course, no one notices a thing (or at least they don't openly acknowledge it), and this quote perfectly highlights society's tendency to turn a blind eye to symptoms of insanity. Vonnegut implies that it doesn't matter what Dwayne says or how crazy he acts; as long as he goes on selling cars and making money—the most important thing in society—no one is likely to be concerned about his well-being. Even if Dwayne becomes so ill that he is unable to do his job and run his businesses, society is still likely to pretend he is fine, until he finally snaps and assaults a room full of people.

Vonnegut again describes people as machines conditioned to one role or another, which they never stray from, unless, of course, they are consumed by "bad chemicals" like Dwayne is. Clearly, Dwayne is not "living up to expectations," and since it hasn't "mattered much for years" what Dwayne says, it is safe to assume that his mental health has been slipping for quite some time. Dwayne continues to suffer and ultimately breaks down because his community is indifferent to his declining mental health and ignores the warning signs, which, Vonnegut implies, are all too often are ignored or minimalized in the real world as well.

Chapter 17 Quotes

Listen: Bunny's mother and my mother were different sorts of human beings, but they were both beautiful in exotic ways, and they both boiled over with chaotic talk about love and peace and wars and evil and desperation, of better days coming by and by, of worse days coming by and by. And both our mothers committed suicide. Bunny's mother ate Drāno. My mother ate sleeping pills, which wasn't nearly as horrible.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Celia Hoover, George / Bunny Hoover

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Vonnegut writes about Bunny's mother as well as his own; both women struggled with mental illness and ultimately committed suicide. This quote underscores how common mental illness and suicide are in American society, but more importantly, it makes these problems appear more tangible and real, forcing readers to acknowledge the mental health crisis in America. When Vonnegut mentions his own mother, mental illness and suicide suddenly become real problems that touch real people. Vonnegut's mother isn't simply a character in his book, created for the entertainment of others—she was an actual person who lived a painful and depressed life.

Vonnegut's description of his mother and Celia as "beautiful" and "exotic" makes them seem vibrant and alive, but their "chaotic talk" about "wars and evil and desperation" is exhausting and it wears them both down. The word "boiled" reflects the women's pain, as does their expectation of "worse days coming by and by." For Celia and Vonnegut's mother, there was no escape from their suffering. This passage is heartbreaking, and it has the effect of drawing increased attention and empathy, both for Vonnegut and for those who suffer from mental illness in general. Vonnegut wasn't forced to watch his own mother choke on industrial drain cleaner, but her death was just as tragic, and he pleads with readers to recognize similar warning signs, so others don't suffer in the same way.

Chapter 18 Quotes

There in the cocktail lounge, peering out through my leaks at a world of my own invention, I mouthed this word: *schizophrenia*.

The sound and appearance of the word had fascinated me for many years. It sounded and looked to me like a human being sneezing in a blizzard of soapflakes.

I did not and do not know for certain that I have that disease. This much I knew and know: I was making myself hideously uncomfortable by not narrowing my attention to details of life which were immediately important, and by refusing to believe what my neighbors believed.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 198-199

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Vonnegut himself enters the bar in Midland City, and it reflects his own struggle with mental illness. Vonnegut's mirrored sunglasses, or "leaks" as Kilgore calls them, give him a bird's-eye view into the universe of his literary creation. The strange blending of reality and fiction that makes up Vonnegut's novel here appears as a hallucination when he suddenly blurts out the word "schizophrenia." While Vonnegut hints at the fact that he is suffering from some form of mental illness, this is first time he explicitly raises the question of whether or not he has schizophrenia, noting, "I did not and do not know for certain that I have that disease." Dwayne goes to great lengths to hide his mental illness, but Vonnegut places his own front and center and begins a conversation.

Unlike Dwayne, Vonnegut isn't ashamed of his illness, and the language he uses to describe it reflects this. He is "fascinated" by the sound of the word, not scared or ashamed, and the image of the word exploding in a "blizzard of soapflakes" is strangely beautiful. Instead of feeling as if his disease somehow taints him, Vonnegut sees it as something almost cleansing. While he's not necessarily praising mental illness, his words are meant to subvert popular opinions in society that view mental illness as a stain or mark to be hidden or denied. Of course, he hasn't been formally diagnosed with schizophrenia, but he is "hideously uncomfortable" and refuses to believe what others believe, which he implies are prime symptoms of schizophrenia. Regardless, Vonnegut shines a light on the

illness, and when he admits that he may personally have it, he attempts to normalize it.

Dwayne was hoping that some of the distinguished visitors to the Arts Festival, who were all staying at the Inn, would come into the cocktail lounge. He wanted to talk to them, if he could, to discover whether they had truths about life which he had never heard before. Here is what he hoped new truths might do for him: enable him to laugh at his troubles, to go on living, and to keep out of the North Wing of the Midland County General Hospital, which was for lunatics.

Related Characters: Dwayne Hoover

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Dwayne arrives at the festival in search of the meaning of life, and it reflects Vonnegut's claim that people take art entirely too seriously. Dwayne is convinced that the artists, people who have "devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty," will know the secret meaning of life. Dwayne's own life is a mess—he is slowly losing his mind, his wife has committed suicide, and his son is a "notorious homosexual"—and he desperately needs answers. It is simply too painful for Dwayne to look too closely at his life and problems, and he is looking for a quick fix.

Readers may conclude that Dwayne doesn't need an artist; he needs a doctor. However, society has placed art on such a pedestal that Dwayne actually believes the artists will know the "truths about life" and will be able to pass that sacred knowledge on to him. He is depending on art to give him a reason to live and laugh, and to keep him sane, which even Vonnegut implies is absurd. Art can't make suddenly Dwayne well or give him a reason to live, and it is in this way that Vonnegut argues against taking art too seriously and searching too deeply for meaning within it.

Chapter 19 Quotes

And he went on staring at me, even though I wanted to stop him now. Here was the thing about my control over the characters I created: I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals. There was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as though I was connected to them by stale rubberbands.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Harold Newcomb Wilbur

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Vonnegut fears that Harold Newcomb Wilbur, the bartender at the cocktail lounge of the Holiday Inn, will kick him out of the bar, and it begins to unravel Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative. Up until this point, Vonnegut has described the characters in his book as machines, created by him and under his control, but Vonnegut can't stop Harold from staring at him and growing even more suspicious of his behavior. Here, Vonnegut implies that even though Harold is his creation, he is only able to guide Harold's movements, and a part of him remains uncontrollable. Despite being a fictional character, Harold begins to take on life of his own, and even appears to have some semblance of free will. When Harold continues to stare at Vonnegut even after he wishes him to stop, it is clear that Harold is capable of his own agenda. As Harold becomes more like an actual person, it makes it more difficult for Vonnegut to continue thinking of him as a machine. In this vein, Harold becomes an actual person with thoughts and feelings. Through this passage, Vonnegut speaks to the broader idea that people are not merely machines but actual sentient human beings with who deserve to be respected, not controlled.

I had no respect whatsoever for the creative works of either the painter or the novelist. I thought Karabekian with his meaningless pictures had entered into a conspiracy with millionaires to make poor people feel stupid. I thought Beatrice Keedsler had joined hands with other old-fashioned storytellers to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Beatrice Keedsler, Rabo Karabekian

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Vonnegut reveals that the Midland City Arts Center has spent fifty thousand dollars on Rabo Karabekian's "meaningless" painting, and it highlights Vonnegut's own disillusionment with art. Karabekian's painting, which symbolizes art's subjectivity, means nothing to Vonnegut or the people of Midland City. It is simply a large band of green paint with a single orange stripe running through it. Clearly, the chairman of the Arts Center finds worth in the painting, but Vonnegut and the others are left feeling "stupid" and grasping for meaning. Here, art is simply a commodity, not a reflection of truth of beauty, and it is assigned worth in a completely arbitrary way.

Vonnegut doesn't respect the work of Beatrice Keedsler, the gothic novelist, either. According to Vonnegut, people try too hard to live like the people in storybooks, and Keedsler's "old-fashioned" stories have tricked readers into believing that life is orderly and has meaning and structure. On the contrary, Vonnegut argues that life, like Karabekian's painting, is full of meaningless "chaos," and to try to make sense and order of it is a waste of time. In this passage, Vonnegut not only implies that art is subjective and arbitrary but desperately in need of reimagining for it to thrive in the disorder of the world.

"I now give you my word of honor," he went on, "that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal—the 'I am' to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us—in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery."

Related Characters: Rabo Karabekian (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Rabo Karabekian's explanation of his painting, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, and it again highlights the subjective and arbitrary nature of art. Rabo's detailed and poetic explanation of his painting is impossible to glean by simply looking at the picture, which is a solid green background with a single orange stripe. The citizens of Midland City find the painting juvenile and ridiculous, yet Rabo attributes great meaning to it. He gives the people his "word of honor" that the picture is valuable and meaningful, and they quickly accept his word and receive the painting as a masterpiece. Rabo's explanation is arbitrary and absurd, and it is in this way that Vonnegut implies that art is lacking any inherent meaning or value.

Ironically, however, Rabo's painting *does* prove to have meaning to Vonnegut—who previously rejected it as ridiculous—and it is even the cause of his own "transformation" and the "spiritual climax" of the book. Rabo's explanation of the "unwavering band of light" harkens to the "inertia," or free will, that Vonnegut's characters present with. Because of Rabo's painting, Vonnegut is better able to appreciate his characters as actual human beings instead of "dead machinery," and he begins to respect them more, which eventually leads to their freedom. Vonnegut encourages his readers to likewise look for the "unwavering band of light" in others, and to appreciate that all humans are sentient beings who deserve respect and freedom.

Epilogue Quotes

"I am approaching my fiftieth birthday, Mr. Trout," I said. "I am cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoy freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career."

"You are the only one I am telling. For the others, tonight will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*."

Related Characters: Kurt Vonnegut (speaker), Kilgore Trout

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very end of the novel, and it represents Vonnegut's attempt to "throw out" his own art. Vonnegut again mentions the need to "cleanse" his mind, or rid it of the nonsense that has accumulated there, and since he has already established that art is arbitrary and subjective, he implies that his own work is meaningless as well. Furthermore, Vonnegut has come to appreciate Kilgore and his other characters as actual people with real thoughts and feelings, and he can no longer control them in good conscience. Vonnegut's newfound guilt over the autonomy of his characters is reflected in his reference to Tolstoy's serfs and Jefferson's slaves.

Through *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut cleanses his mind of all forms of slavery and exploitation, and it is clear that he has begun to think of his own characters in much the same way. When Vonnegut sets Kilgore free, he metaphorically rejects all forms of human exploitation and moves toward the latter part of his life a better person with a clean mind and conscience. Vonnegut's closing passage is obviously far-fetched and quite absurd; however, Vonnegut contends that art often is absurd, and as such, he leaves the reader with one last bit of artistic absurdity.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

"Breakfast of Champions is a registered trademark of General Mills, Inc." and it is also the title of this book. This book is not associated with General Mills, nor is it an attempt to endorse or "disparage their fine products."

Vonnegut's use of a registered trademark as the title of this novel reflects the book's overall theme of consumerism; however, it also reflects a postmodern understanding of the arbitrary nature of language. To General Mills, "Breakfast of Champions" is a bowl of cereal, but in Vonnegut's book it is a gin martini. Thus, the meaning of words is not fixed or based on inherent definition; rather, meaning is based on agreement and convenience.

Vonnegut dedicates this book to Phoebe Hurty, a forty-year-old woman he met during the Great Depression when he was sixteen. She was wealthy, but she still worked at the Indianapolis *Times* where she wrote a "sane and funny advice-to-the-lovelorn column." The Indianapolis *Times* was a "good paper" but is "now defunct. Defunct." Phoebe also wrote advertisements, and when she gave Vonnegut a job writing ads too, he became friends with her sons.

The word "defunct" as a complete sentence is repeated a handful of times throughout the novel and is used to describe the death of businesses. Here, Vonnegut's description of the Indianapolis Times *as a "good paper" also underscores his argument of subjectivity. He thought the paper was good and evidently so did Phoebe, yet the fact that it has since gone out of business implies that most people were reading and buying a different paper. In other words, they thought a different newspaper was better.*

Phoebe spoke "bawdily" to Vonnegut and her sons. She was "funny" and "liberating," and she taught them to be "impolite in conversations" concerning sex, but also those about "American history and famous heroes, about the distribution of wealth, about school, about everything." Now, Vonnegut makes his "living by being impolite," although he isn't as good at it as Phoebe was. She had more "grace" because the Depression made her believe that America "would be happy and just and rational when prosperity came." "*Prosperity*" used to mean "*Paradise*," and Phoebe believed that her "impoliteness" would eventually "give shape to an American paradise." No one believes in a "new American paradise" anymore.

Breakfast of Champions *is Vonnegut's attempt at one of Phoebe's "impolite conversations." The book openly criticizes American history, famous heroes, the distribution of wealth, school, and much more. In this way, Vonnegut lays out a road map to this otherwise random, and often strange, book. Vonnegut's conclusion that no one believes in an "American paradise" reflects his pessimistic message: American society is structured in such a way that many, like the poor and people of color, are unable to prosper.*

This book expresses Vonnegut's "suspicion" that "human beings are robots, are machines," which stems from his own encounters seeing syphilitic men in his hometown Indianapolis and in traveling circuses when he was young. The men, driven insane by syphilis, were a "common spectacle." They were "infested with carnivorous little corkscrews" which ate holes in their brains and interrupted their motor skills. The men "shuddered" and "idled" simply trying to walk. Vonnegut recalls watching a syphilitic man trying to cross the street. "He certainly looked like a machine to me when I was boy," Vonnegut writes.

This is the beginning of Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative. Here, the people were controlled by disease, but in the book, people are controlled through other means, such as corporate advertising and systemic racism. The notion of people-as-machines creates an emotional distance that enables others to more easily accept injustice and tragedy. Here, the idea of sick men going publicly insane is awful. They clearly needed help, but other people simply stare or walk by—the men are even used as attractions in circuses. Vonnegut's claim that they "certainly looked like a machine to me" allows for this emotional distance and perpetuates injustice.

Vonnegut also thinks of people as "huge, rubbery test tubes" with "chemical reactions seething inside." When Vonnegut and Dwayne Hoover, one of the characters in this book, were young, they saw many people with huge goiters on their necks. "All they had to do in order to have ordinary lives, it turned out," Vonnegut says, was eat a miniscule amount of iodine daily. Vonnegut's mother "wrecked her brains with chemicals" in the form of sleeping pills, and whenever Vonnegut gets "depressed," he takes "a little pill" to "cheer up again." Vonnegut claims that it is a "big temptation" to create characters who are the way they are because of "faulty wiring" or "microscopic amounts of chemicals" that they either "ate or failed to eat on that particular day."

Vonnegut's description of people as "test tubes" with "chemical reactions seething inside" reflects his underlying argument that people aren't machines but sentient beings who suffer because of the "programming" of American society. Often, it doesn't take much to change this programming—a "microscopic chemical" or a "little pill"—and Vonnegut's book is his own attempt to address the "faulty wiring" that has caused many of society's ills. This passage also reflects how common issues of mental health are in American society, as both Vonnegut and his mother have been personally affected by mental illness.

This book is Vonnegut's "fiftieth-birthday present" to himself. At fifty, Vonnegut is "programmed" to act "childishly," and so this book is filled with silly drawings. He is trying to "clear [his] head of all the junk in there—the assholes, the flags, the underpants." Vonnegut "throws out" characters from his other books as well. "I'm not going to put on any more puppet shows," he says. He is attempting to make his brain "as empty" as the day he was "born onto this damaged planet," which, Vonnegut claims, "is something most white Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans, should do." The things in Vonnegut's head, which have been put there by "other people," don't "fit together nicely" and "are often useless and ugly." They are disproportionate "with life as it really is."

This passage advances Vonnegut's theory that people are "programmed" by an unjust society. Society has attempted to program Vonnegut, as a white man, to believe that he deserves more than his black counterpart. This programming is categorically false and immoral, which is why Vonnegut claims dispensing with this harmful programming is something "most white Americans" should do. As Vonnegut's characters often perpetuate this racist programming, he therefore "throws [them] out." Vonnegut's reference to his novels as "puppet shows" underscores the idea that people, and therefore his novels by extension, are controlled through this outside "programming."

Going back in time to his birthday, November 11, 1922, this book is "a sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which [Vonnegut] throws over [his] shoulder." Vonnegut's birthday, a "sacred day called *Armistice Day*," is dedicated to the soldiers who fought in the First World War. Now, Armistice Day is known as Veterans' Day. "Armistice Day was sacred. Veterans' Day is not," he says. So, Vonnegut "throws out" Veterans' Day but keeps Armistice Day because he doesn't "want to throw away any sacred things." Vonnegut clarifies what he considers sacred. "*Romeo and Juliet*," he says, and "all music."

This passage again reflects subjectivity and the arbitrary nature of language and meaning. Armistice Day has morphed into something that, in Vonnegut's opinion, is a poor substitute for what the holiday originally stood for—a day to honor Veterans and their sacrifices. In the novel, Veterans' Day is simply another reason for businesses and corporations to launch new sales promotions. Vonnegut feels the need to define "sacred" because the definition changes depending on who is defining it. Furthermore, Vonnegut's opinion that Romeo and Juliet and "all music" is sacred implies that, despite his heavy critique of art in the novel, he is still convinced of art's worth and importance in society.

CHAPTER 1

This is the story of "two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which is dying fast." Kilgore Trout, a "nobody" science-fiction writer, assumes that his meaningless life is nearing its end, but he is wrong. By the time he dies, Kilgore will be revered. The other man, Dwayne Hoover, a Pontiac dealer, is "on the brink" of insanity.

Vonnegut's environmental message is clear from the first sentence of the novel's first chapter. Earth, the setting of the novel, is "dying fast," and Dwayne Hoover's Pontiac dealership metaphorically represents one of the major causes: massive pollution from the American car industry.

"Listen:" Kilgore and Dwayne live in the United States of America, where "a lot of citizens are so ignored and cheated and insulted that they think they might be in the wrong country, or even the wrong planet." Their country's motto, "*E pluribus unum*," or "*Out of Many, One*," says nothing of "fairness or brotherhood or hope or happiness." Instead, it is as if the country is telling its citizens, "*In nonsense is strength*."

Vonnegut repeatedly tells the reader to "Listen" throughout the novel. This technique, which Vonnegut uses in other novels as well, draws increased attention to whatever he is about to say. Here, Vonnegut plainly says that American society marginalizes certain citizens, namely the poor and people of color, for the benefit of others. The nation's motto is essentially arbitrary "nonsense" that means nothing to those who are marginalized.

Some of this "nonsense" is "evil" and "conceals great crimes." For instance, schoolteachers everywhere tell children that America was "discovered" in 1492; however, there where already millions of people "living full and imaginative lives" there. 1492 was simply the year "sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them."

The "great crimes" Vonnegut speaks of are racism and exploitation. As he later clarifies, the "sea pirates were white" and those they sought to "cheat and rob and kill" were not. This crime against humanity is glorified and perpetuated across America in schoolrooms everywhere through lessons about Christopher Columbus, who came to the continent later known as America in 1492.

Schoolchildren are taught more "evil nonsense" when they are told that the "sea pirates" founded a government to be "a beacon of freedom" to people around the world. There is a statue of the "imaginary beacon" for all to see (Vonnegut includes a picture of the beacon, or torch, which looks like a "ice-cream cone on fire"). The pirates had slaves and "used human beings for machinery." The natives already on the continent were "cooper-colored" and the "sea pirates were white." The humans brought to the continent by the pirates were black. "Color was everything."

Here, Vonnegut directly identifies America's Founding Fathers as "sea pirates," or in other words, racists. He maintains that the idea of America as a "beacon of freedom" for all is simply "evil nonsense" because those who were owned as slaves and exploited for labor were not given the same freedoms and opportunities that others enjoyed. Vonnegut ultimately argues that the legacy of slavery in America means that people of color are still without basic freedoms and opportunities.

The pirates were able to take over the continent because they had weapons and "the best boats," but they were successful mostly due to their "capacity to astonish." Until the sea pirates came, no one had ever seen humans so "heartless and greedy."

The sea pirates set a precedent for immoral behavior that is reflected throughout much of the novel in the form of corporate greed, racism, and human exploitation.

By the time Dwayne and Kilgore meet, America is "the richest and most powerful country on the planet." Many other countries, however, are "uninhabitable." They are overpopulated and running out of room. There is little to eat, but "still the people go on fucking all the time. *Fucking* is how babies are made." Some countries are "*Communists*," and they believe that all resources should be shared equally, yet "more babies are arriving all the time—kicking and screaming, yelling for milk."

This passage introduces Vonnegut's concern with overpopulation and the role that the rising population plays in the destruction of the planet. Vonnegut's mention of communism is in keeping with his overall critique of capitalism, yet he seems to concede that even a communist approach can't solve problems of inequality if more and more people are born into a society where resources are already dwindling.

Dwayne and Kilgore's America is "opposed to Communism" and doesn't make citizens share if they don't want to; "most of them don't want to." Dwayne is very wealthy, or "fabulously well-to-do," but Kilgore owns "doodley-squat." They will meet at an Arts Festival in Midland City, Dwayne's hometown.

Dwayne reflects American excess and greed. He owns multiple businesses and is exceedingly rich, yet he doesn't share with the less fortunate because he doesn't want to, and his capitalist society doesn't compel him to either.

Dwayne is "going insane," mostly due to "a matter of chemicals." His chemicals are out of proportion, but "like all novice lunatics," Dwayne needs "some bad ideas" for his lunacy to have "shape and direction." Together, "bad chemicals and bad ideas are the Yin and Yang of madness" (Vonnegut includes a drawing of the Yin and Yang symbol, the "Chinese symbol of harmony").

Vonnegut draws attention to mental illness in American society, which he argues is not solely due to the inner workings of physiology and the mind. Instead, bad social "ideas" also add to this chemical imbalance. In Dwayne's case, it is not his "bad chemicals" alone that make him attack the people of Midland City—it is the "idea," planted by Kilgore's book. In this way, society is partially responsible for mental illness. Therefore, Vonnegut implies, society is responsible for recognizing and managing mental illness as well.

Dwayne will get his "bad ideas" from Kilgore. Kilgore believes himself to be "not only harmless but invisible," and he often "supposes he is dead." Kilgore, however, gives Dwayne the idea that everybody on Earth is a robot *except* for Dwayne, and that all other people are "fully automatic machines whose purpose is to stimulate Dwayne." Unlike everyone else, Dwayne "has free will."

Like in Kilgore's story, many characters in Breakfast of Champions *don't necessarily have "free will" either. Wayne Hoobler, the black ex-con, doesn't exactly enjoy free will, nor does Gloria Browning, who is presumably forced to undergo an illegal abortion. These people are at the mercy of others, just like the robots in Kilgore's book are at the mercy of the Creator of the Universe.*


When Trout realizes that that he can "bring evil into the world" through "the form of bad ideas," he becomes a "fanatic" preaching the power of "ideas as causes and cures for diseases." At first, no one listens, and Trout is left ignored, yelling: "Ideas or the lack of them cause disease!" Eventually, Kilgore will become an important figure in the study of mental health. His theories, which he will assert through his science-fiction writing, will be his legacy. The American Academy of Art and Sciences will honor Kilgore with a memorial upon his death. Vonnegut includes a picture of the monument and it reads: "Kilgore Trout / 1907-1981/ 'We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane.'"

Through the inscription on Kilgore's memorial, Vonnegut implies that society's "bad ideas," like racism and capitalism, are unhealthy and arguably insane. A society that seeks to marginalize others through various means should never be considered "healthy," and Vonnegut's book reflects this opinion. Additionally, Kilgore's writing, which is a form of art, is initially thought to be worthless but is ultimately considered priceless, and this reflects Vonnegut's argument that art's value is subjective and often arbitrary.


CHAPTER 2

Dwayne is a "widower" who lives alone in a fancy house in the wealthy part of town with his dog, Sparky. Dwayne has a "black servant named Lottie Davis," and while he likes her just fine, he spends most of his time talking to Sparky. Dwayne's talks with Sparky "go on unrevised," so this is never an indication of his insanity to Lottie.

Lottie Davis reflects systemic racism in American society. As a woman of color, she is placed in a position of service to Dwayne, a white man, and he clearly doesn't respect her. Dwayne may claim to like her, but when given the choice, he chooses to talk to his dog and ignore Lottie.

Kilgore has a parakeet named Bill, and like Dwayne, Kilgore spends most of his time talking to his pet. He tells Bill that the atmosphere will soon be "unbreathable," and it will be the end of the world. "Any time now," Kilgore tells Bill. "And high time, too." To Kilgore, "humanity deserves to die horribly, since it has behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet."

This passage highlights Vonnegut's environmental argument. The atmosphere is not suddenly becoming "unbreathable"—in many cases, humanity has willfully and knowingly destroyed the environment, and in Vonnegut's judgement, the world "deserves" the environmental state of the planet since humanity is directly to blame for its ruin.

Kilgore is in the habit of calling **mirrors** "*leaks*." He pretends that mirrors are "holes between two universes," and he warns small children not to get to close to them. "You wouldn't want to wind up in the other universe, would you?" he asks them. Whenever someone says they must "take a leak," Kilgore tells them: "Where I come from, that means you're about to steal a mirror." After Kilgore is dead, "everybody" will call mirrors *leaks*.

Kilgore's habit of calling mirrors "leaks" is another example of the arbitrary nature of language. Regardless of whether a reflective surface is referred to as a "leak" or a "mirror," it refers to the same thing, which implies that words and meaning are ultimately arbitrary. The fact the Kilgore is so revered by the time of his death that he has the social power and authority to reassign the meaning of words is absurd, but it is in this way that Vonnegut argues any *meaning is likewise arbitrary and often absurd.*

In 1972, when Kilgore meets Dwayne, Kilgore is living in a "basement apartment in Cohoes, New York." He is in the business of aluminum storm windows, but he works as an installer and not a salesman because he doesn't have any "charm." Dwayne has charm but not Kilgore. "I can have oodles of charm," Vonnegut says, "when I want to."

Vonnegut's personal interjection is one way in which this novel is a piece of metafiction. He constantly reminds the reader that the story is his creation, a form of art, which he presents in an attempt to entertain and, hopefully, inspire.

Kilgore is the author of over one hundred novels and two thousand short stories, but decent publishers have never heard of him. He doesn't make copies of his writing, and he sends his work off to publishers without a return address. Kilgore sends most of his work to "World Classics Library," a publisher of "hard-core pornography." They use his work to "give bulk to books and magazines of salacious pictures." They pay him "doodley-squat."

Kilgore's pornographic publisher makes his eventual transformation into a respected writer and public intellectual all the more absurd.

"World Classics Library" never tells Kilgore when or where his writing will be published, so he must search pornography stores to find them. Usually, the publisher changes the title, like "Pan Galactic Straw-boss" becomes "Mouth Crazy," and illicit pictures accompany the text. Trout's "most widely-distributed book," *Plague on Wheels*, did not undergo a title change in publication, but Kilgore's name is obscured by a banner that reads: "WIDE-OPEN BEAVERS INSIDE!" The pictures inside are of women with their "legs far apart." The word "beaver" is "code" used by men to talk about a woman's vagina. "A beaver," Vonnegut writes, is "actually a large rodent." He includes a drawing of a beaver as well as a crude drawing of a woman's vagina for comparison. "This is where babies come from," he says.

"World Classics Library's" use of the word "beaver" to describe a woman's vagina also reflects the postmodern opinion that language is arbitrary. While most of the English-speaking population agrees that a beaver is a rodent, some men—a comparatively smaller yet powerful part of the population—have decided that the word "beaver" also signifies a woman's vagina. Vonnegut also takes this opportunity to warn against overpopulation, the dangers of which are often ignored in the blind quest for "beaver."

Plague on Wheels is about a "dying planet" named Lingo-Three that is inhabited by American-made automobiles. The cars live on "fossil fuels" and can "reproduce." Space aliens visit Lingo-Three because they hear that the planet's atmosphere has been "destroyed" and they want to visit the planet before the automobiles become extinct. Kago, the leader of the aliens, can do nothing to help, but he promises to remember them. "You will be gone," Kago tells the cars, "but not forgotten." Kago indeed keeps their memory alive and tells the inhabitants of a planet named "Earth" all about them. Kago, however, doesn't realize that Earthlings can be "easily felled by a single idea." On Earth, there is "no immunity to cuckoo ideas."

Vonnegut purposefully draws a parallel between the fictional destruction of Lingo-Three and the similar demise that many environmentalists argue will happen on Earth if people continue to rely on fossil fuels, particularly through the manufacturing and use of American automobiles. Not only does the process of manufacturing cars negatively impact the environment through the production of industrial waste, but this negative effect is continued through the burning of gasoline and other fossil fuels required to run them. In this way, Plague on Wheels *serves as a cautionary tale.*

CHAPTER 3

In 1972, Kilgore receives his first piece of fan mail from an "eccentric millionaire" named Eliot Rosewater. Kilgore is "so invisible" that Rosewater must hire a private investigator to find him. In the end, "the search cost eighteen thousand dollars." Rosewater's letter declares *Plague on Wheels* the "greatest novel in the English language," and he tells Kilgore that he should be the President of the United States.

Eliot Rosewater's willingness to spend so much money searching for Kilgore just to send him a fan letter underscore's Vonnegut's argument that art's value is not inherent or universal. The masses are indifferent to Kilgore's artistic efforts, but Rosewater finds serious value in Kilgore's art, and this is reflected in his eighteen-thousand-dollar search.

Kilgore can't be the president, however, because he was born in Bermuda. His father had been an American citizen who worked in Bermuda studying Bermuda Erns. The erns "eventually became extinct, despite anything anyone could do." They were ultimately killed by a fungus which had been brought "to their rookery in the innocent form of athlete's foot." The dead erns are the source of Kilgore's deep "pessimism" that "overwhelms" his life and "destroys" three marriages and his relationship with his son, Leo.

The extinction of the Bermuda Ern (a type of bird) is more evidence of the destruction of the planet. The erns, abundant before the colonization of Bermuda, were ultimately killed by the influx of people and non-native species, such as pigs and cats, to the island. Vonnegut's claim that the erns' extinction was due to an "innocent form of athlete's foot" is symbolic of the human cause of this environmental tragedy.

Kilgore considers Rosewater's letter "an invasion of privacy." Vonnegut interrupts to say that Kilgore Trout is entirely his creation. "I made him snaggle-tooted," he says. "I gave him hair, but I turned it white." Vonnegut has given Kilgore the legs of his own father, which he describes as "hairless broomsticks." Vonnegut also makes Kilgore receive an invitation to an Arts Festival shortly after Rosewater's letter.

Vonnegut's interruption firmly cements Kilgore, and the other characters, as Vonnegut's creation. In this way, Kilgore and the other characters are machines that Vonnegut controls, which makes Vonnegut's later admission that he can't completely control them even more powerful and startling.

The invite is from Fred T. Barry, the chairman of a festival in celebration of the opening of the Mildred Barry Memorial Center for the Arts in Midland City. Barry admits that he has not read any of Kilgore's books, but Kilgore comes "highly recommended by Eliot Rosewater." Inside the envelope is a check for one thousand dollars. Kilgore is "suddenly fabulously well-to-do."

This passage again points to the arbitrary nature of the value of art. Fred T. Barry knows nothing about Kilgore's writing, but he is willing to give Kilgore a considerable amount money and invite him to publicly speak about art merely on Rosewater's recommendation.

Fred T. Barry invites Kilgore because he needs a "fabulously valuable oil **painting**" to showcase during the Festival. He can't afford one, but Rosewater has an "El Greco worth three million dollars or more," which he promises to display it at the arts center if Barry invites Kilgore to speak at the Festival. Barry wants Kilgore to wear a tuxedo, and luckily, he has one, although he hasn't worn it for over forty years. The last time Kilgore wore a tux was to the senior dance at Thomas Jefferson High School. Kilgore's school in Dayton, Ohio, had been "named after a slave owner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty."

Rosewater's donation of the El Greco again underscores art's subjective value. When Rosewater donates the painting worth at least three million dollars, this implies that Kilgore's art is also worth a comparable amount. Of course, Kilgore's art isn't worth anything according to his publishers and is frequently published next to tasteless pornography, but Rosewater is willing to pay an absurd amount of money for it. In this vein, Vonnegut suggests that art's value is ultimately assigned in completely random ways.

Kilgore has no intention of becoming the "laughing stock" of the Festival, but after thinking more about it, he decides to go. "An unhappy failure is exactly what they need to see," Kilgore says. "Listen," he says to his parakeet, "I'm leaving the cage, but I'm coming back. I'm going out there to show them what nobody has ever seen at an arts festival before: a representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty—and didn't find doodley-squat!"

Kilgore functions as a sort of anti-artist. He turned to art to find truth and beauty but found nothing, and he wants to bring that same level of disappointment to the festival. He goes to the festival for the very same reason he initially refused to go—to become a "laughing stock." He wants to be laughed at, which is why he later tries to show up as the "dirtiest of old men."

CHAPTER 4

In the meantime, Dwayne is "getting crazier." He hallucinates a large "duck directing traffic" in an intersection but tells no one. "He maintains secrecy," but his "bad chemicals" are done with secrecy. They want Dwayne "to *do* queer things" as well, "and make a lot of noise."

Dwayne's desire to "maintain secrecy" regarding his mental health reflects the stigma of mental illness in American society. Often, mental illness is regarded with shame and embarrassment, which can lead those afflicted to suffer in silence.

After Dwayne goes publicly crazy, people who know him are "furious with themselves" for ignoring his "obvious cries for help." The local paper runs an editorial called "A CRY FOR HELP," and Francine Pefko, Dwayne's "white secretary and mistress," the woman who knows him best, claims that he appeared "happier" before losing his mind. "I kept thinking," Francine says, "'he is finally getting over his wife's suicide.'"

Midland City's failure to notice Dwayne's "obvious cries for help" reflects society's own tendency to ignore mental illness. Often, signs of mental illness are noted but willfully avoided, and this passage implies that society has a duty to intervene when someone in their community is struggling.

Francine works at *Dwayne Hoover's Exit Eleven Pontiac Village*. The dealership is near the interstate, next to the new Holiday Inn. She recalls that Dwayne began to sing a lot before going crazy, old songs from his childhood like "Blue Moon." The "black bus boy" and the "black waiter" in the lounge at the Holiday Inn think Dwayne's singing is strange but expected. "If I owned what he owns, I'd sing, too," the waiter says.

Notably, the black waiter and the black bus boy are two more examples of service positions being held by African Americans in the novel, which is another form of exploitation. The waiter's comment also reflects this oppression; Dwayne isn't singing because he's crazy, he's singing because he's rich.

Harry LeSabre, Dwayne's "white sales manager," is the only person to notice Dwayne's change in mental status, and he talks to Francine about it. "Something has come over Dwayne," Harry says. "I don't find him so charming anymore." Harry has known Dwayne for over twenty years and first began working for him when the dealership was "right on the edge of the Nigger part of town. A Nigger," Vonnegut says, "is a human being who is black." Before the dealership moved to the interstate, they were constantly robbed. "I know him the way a combat soldier knows his buddy," Harry tells Francine. Something is wrong with Dwayne.

In this passage, Vonnegut employs a racial slur that is not part of his characters' dialogue. In other words, Vonnegut himself *is engaged in racist language in this passage, which is hard to read; however, that is exactly what Vonnegut intends. He comments only on the things he wants to "cleanse" or rid from society, and since racism is often loud and ugly in American society, the same goes in his book. Here, Vonnegut holds up a mirror and forces society to look at its ugly reflection.*

"Listen:" Harry tells Francine that Dwayne is "changing." Harry can feel it. He tells Francine to go ask Vernon Garr, Dwayne's longtime mechanic, what he thinks, but Vernon has noticed nothing. Vernon's wife, Mary, is "schizophrenic" and believes that Vernon is "trying to turn her brains to plutonium," so he hasn't really been paying attention to Dwayne. Francine tells Harry that Dwayne is "human like anybody else." He has had "a few bad days" is all, and they should cut him some slack. After all, he is the best employer in town.

Vernon's failure to notice Dwayne's mental decline because he is too busy dealing with his wife's own insanity is highly ironic and underscores the fact that many people in American society are dealing with some sort of mental illness. In this way, Vonnegut again attempts to destigmatize mental illness, and essentially raises the following question: if so many people are affected by mental illness, why is society so ashamed of it?

Harry is "upset" with Dwayne because earlier that day he had gone into Dwayne's office—as he always does, to make small talk—and Dwayne screamed at him. Harry was telling Dwayne that he is "sad sometimes" because he has no children, but he doesn't want to "contribute to overpopulation." Harry had said that perhaps he "should have adopted," and Dwayne began to yell. Dwayne himself had been adopted, and this connection "caused an unfortunate chemical reaction in Dwayne's head."

This passage reflects Vonnegut's argument regarding overpopulation and the subsequent destruction of the planet. More specifically, however, Harry's adoption comment and Dwayne's response also suggests that Dwayne is struggling with his emotions regarding his own adoption, which is negatively affecting his mental health.


"Harry," Dwayne said, "why don't you get a bunch of cotton waste from Vern Garr, soak it in *Blue Sunoco*, and burn up your fucking wardrobe? You make me feel like I'm at *Watson Brothers*." Watson Brothers is the name of a local, upscale funeral parlor. Next week is "Hawaiian Week" at the dealership, a sales promotion in which customers win trips to Hawaii, and Dwayne told Harry not to bother showing up without new clothes. "I'm absolutely serious," he told Harry. "Burn your clothes and get new ones, or apply for work at Watson Brothers."

Dwayne's verbal attack on Harry appears to be a symptom of his declining mental health, and it foreshadows the physical attacks Dwayne will commit at the end of the novel. Dwayne's outburst is essentially "a cry for help," but Harry takes his insults too personally. Additionally, Dwayne's mention of a specific brand of gasoline and a specific funeral parlor again point to capitalism and advertising in American society.


Harry was shocked by Dwayne's outburst. Harry is "generally acknowledged to be one of the most effective sales managers" in all the Midwest, and Dwayne has never mentioned his clothes before. This outburst might not have mattered so much, but Harry is "a secret transvestite," and he is convinced that Dwayne's comment about his clothes means he knows his secret. Not only can Harry be arrested and fined thousands of dollars for dressing like a woman on the weekends, he can be given five years in the Sexual Offenders' Wing of the Adult Correctional Institution at Shepherdstown.

Vonnegut's portrayal of Harry as "a secret transvestite" emphasizes the absurdity of the laws against him. Harry's desire to dress like a woman on the weekend harms no one, yet he could be imprisoned for it. Harry is a productive and valuable member of society but is made to hide like a criminal, the stress of which is almost certainly negatively affecting his own mental health, which is precisely why he takes Dwayne's outburst so badly.

That weekend, the "bad chemicals" in Dwayne's brain wake him in the middle of the night. He goes to the bathroom where he puts a "loaded thirty-eight caliber revolver" into his mouth. Where Dwayne lives, "anybody who wants [a gun] can get one down at his local hardware store." With the gun in his mouth, Dwayne thinks about the bullet ripping through his brain, and then he removes the gun and shoots the picture of a flamingo that decorates his shower door. "Dumb fucking bird," Dwayne says.

Dwayne is obviously struggling with suicidal ideations, just as his wife and Vonnegut's own mother did as well. Several characters contemplate suicide in the novel, which points to the prevalence of mental illness in American society.

No one hears the shots through Dwayne's fancy, well-insulated home, and he walks outside to play basketball in his driveway and talk to his dog, Sparky. "You and me, Sparky," he says to the dog. No one sees Dwayne in the driveway because he is blocked by tall shrubs. He stops playing basketball and climbs into a Plymouth Fury "he had taken in trade the day before." As Dwayne drives away, he yells, "Keeping abreast of the competition!" so his neighbors won't think it is strange that he is not driving a Pontiac.

Dwayne's isolated home and driveway seems symbolic of his attempts to hide his mental illness and society's overall desire to avoid grappling with difficult subjects like mental health. Dwayne is shooting up his bathroom and playing basketball in the middle of night, but he keeps these telltale signs of distress out of the view of others.

As Dwayne races down the road, he "slams into a guardrail," spins a few times, "jumps a curb," and comes to a rest in a vacant lot. Since Dwayne owns the lot, he decides to sit awhile. No one sees or hears a thing, and the only cop on patrol is sleeping around the corner. Dwayne listens to advertisements on the radio trying to sell him trees and shrubs. Most messages "sent and received in [Dwayne's] country," Vonnegut writes, "have to do with buying or selling some damn thing." As Dwayne sits there alone, the ads are "like lullabies" to him.

Dwayne owns several vacant lots, so by resting in one of them, he is resting in his financial comforts. Here, the advertisements serve as a form of programming for Dwayne, which echoes Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative. The advertisements keep him wanting more, which in turn fuels his capitalist behavior. As such, the advertisements are like music to Dwayne's ears, and therefore have a calming, almost hypnotizing effect.

CHAPTER 5

Meanwhile, Kilgore has hitchhiked to New York City and is trying to sleep in a movie theater. He can't afford a hotel, and while he has never slept in a theater before, he knows it is "the sort of thing really dirty old men" do. He wants "to arrive in Midland City as the dirtiest of old men." Kilgore will be speaking at a symposium at the Arts Festival called "The Future of the American Novel in the Age of McLuhan." Kilgore already knows what he will say when he gets there, which is: "I don't know who McLuhan is, but I know what it's like to spend the night with a lot of other dirty old men in a movie theater in New York City. Could we talk about that?"

As an anti-artist, Kilgore doesn't want to arrive looking clean and presentable—he wants Midland City to be repulsed. Kilgore hopes to embody the ugliness that he has found in his search for truth and beauty. Kilgore isn't a typical "artist," which is reflected in his ignorance of McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher who studied the theory of media. Vonnegut's mention of McLuhan becomes more interesting when considered in context with Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative and the use of corporate advertising as a means of control.

Kilgore has already found two of his books, *Plague on Wheels* and *Now It Can Be Told*. He also purchased a magazine with one of his stories in it, a tuxedo shirt with "ruffles," and a package containing a cummerbund, boutonniere, and bow tie. He also bought a razor and toothbrush. Kilgore hasn't "owned a toothbrush for years."

Kilgore has written over one hundred novels, yet he is only able to find two, which again highlights Kilgore as a failure. Furthermore, his other purchases highlight just how ridiculous he will look when he arrives in Midland City.

As Kilgore sits in the empty theater with his books and clothes in his lap, he makes up a new novel about an Earthling who goes to an alien planet where all the plants and animals have been "killed by pollution." Only humanoids survive, and they eat "food made of petroleum and coal." The humanoids ask the Earthling if there are dirty movies where he comes from. "Yes," he answers. "As dirty as movies can get." The humanoids take this as a challenge and force the Earthling to watch one of their dirty movies for comparison. The movie is about a family who eats a feast of "soup, meat, biscuits, butter, vegetables," and so forth until they can eat no more. They then proceed to throw the leftover food in the garbage. The audience in the theater "goes wild."

Kilgore's new story again underscores the destruction of the planet, but it also reflects the postmodern understanding of the fluidity of language. The Earthling defines a "dirty movie" as something sexual and salacious—as something offensive. To the humanoids, the most offensive thing is the wasting of food, and this becomes their own version of "dirty movies." The both use the same word to describe different movies, which underscores the unstable nature of language.

When the Earthling and the humanoids exit the theater, they are "accosted by humanoid whores," who offer them food instead of sex. They don't really have food, however, so the humanoid whores offer to cook "petroleum and coal products at fancy prices" and "talk dirty" about fresh food while they eat it.

Again, Kilgore's story underscores the destruction of the planet. The humanoids' planet is so polluted that fresh food cannot be harvested, and Vonnegut implies that Earth could potentially suffer the same fate.

CHAPTER 6

Back in Midland City, Dwayne puts the Plymouth into drive. He drives past his Pontiac dealership to the new Holiday Inn, which Dwayne happens to own as well, in partnership with a few other businessmen. Dwayne also owns "three Burger Chefs, too, and five coin-operated car washes, and pieces of the Sugar Creek Drive-In Theatre, Radio Station WMCY, the Three Maples Par-Three Golf Course, and seventeen hundred shares of common stock in Barryton, Limited, a local electronics firm."

Dwayne is the embodiment of capitalist greed, and his ownership of a ridiculous number of business reflects this. Dwayne is clearly motivated by the possibility of never-ending profits, and he owns multiple businesses to achieve more wealth.

As Dwayne looks down over Midland City from the roof of the Holiday Inn, he doesn't recognize the lights below. He had been born and adopted here but the city looks foreign. "Where am I?" Dwayne asks. He forgets everything—even that his wife, Celia, has committed suicide "by eating Drāno," and that his son, George, is "a notorious homosexual" named Bunny. "Where am I?" Dwayne asks again.

Celia's suicide and Bunny's sexuality serve as triggers that exacerbate Dwayne's mental illness because society has similarly stigmatized suicide and homosexuality. The judgement of others only serves to compound Dwayne's stress, and in this way, Vonnegut is openly critical of these opinions.

CHAPTER 7

The lights go on in the empty movie theater in New York City. "No more fun tonight, grandfather," the manager says to Kilgore. "Time to go home." Kilgore slowly gathers his belongings and heads out the front door to Forty-second Street.

The theater manager's reference to Kilgore as a "grandfather" reflects Kilgore's desire to be seen as "the dirtiest of old men," which adds to Kilgore's identity as an anti-artist.

CHAPTER 8

Forty-second Street is "a dangerous place" due to "chemicals and the uneven distribution of wealth." Some of the people there are "like Dwayne" and naturally have "bad chemicals" in their heads, but many people "buy bad chemicals" and "eat them or sniff them." They even "inject" chemicals using a special "device." Vonnegut includes a drawing of a hypodermic needle.

Vonnegut isolates capitalism as one of the main reasons for the uneven distribution of wealth, and here, he directly blames that inequality for the drug crisis that is gripping America. In this way, Vonnegut argues that the effects of capitalism are varied and go beyond matters of mere money, which ultimately affects mental health as well.

Trout tells the manager of the theater that he is looking for "a cheap hotel," and they decide to walk together. The manager's family thinks he is working at an engineering firm. "Hard times," Kilgore says. A white Oldsmobile begins to closely follow them, and the car is the last thing Kilgore remembers before waking up under the Queensboro Bridge with "his trousers and underpants around his ankles" and all his money gone.

Kilgore's comment, "Hard times," is another reflection of the uneven distribution of wealth. The theater manager is forced to work a job that he is implied to be overqualified for just to make ends meet. What's worse, he then must lie to his family about because he is ashamed. Kilgore and the manager are in a rough part of town, and this implies that they are ultimately robbed because of the unequal distribution of wealth. The poor have no other way to gain wealth, so they steal it.

CHAPTER 9

Dwayne comes down from the roof of the Holiday Inn and goes to the front desk to rent a room. Despite the late hour, a black man stands at the desk in front of him. The man, named Cyprian Ukwende, is a physician from Nigeria who is working in Midland City's emergency room. He is staying at the Holiday Inn until he can find a cheap apartment. Dwayne "humbly" waits his turn. "Times change," Dwayne says to himself. "Times change."

Dwayne's comment, "Times change," is in response to Dr. Ukwende's race. Dwayne "humbly" waits his turn behind the black man as a reflection of his tolerance and support of equal rights; however, he appears to be tolerant in order to make himself look better, not because he actually acknowledges Ukwende's inherent right to equality.

CHAPTER 10

After leaving the police station, Kilgore gets a ride with a truck driver "hauling seventy-eight thousand pounds of Spanish olives." The driver, "who is white," tells Kilgore that "he used to be a hunter and a fisherman." Now, it "breaks his heart" to think of the state of the woods and rivers compared to just one hundred years earlier. "And when you think of the shit that most of these factories make—wash day products, catfood, pop—" the trucker says.

Ironically, the truck driver laments the deteriorating state of the environment but then actively contributes to the problem through his profession as a truck driver. He pumps pollution into the air to bring Spanish olives, a completely arbitrary commodity, to the masses. Here, Vonnegut implies that olives aren't worth the damage delivering them causes the environment.

The truck driver "has a point," Vonnegut writes. "The planet is being destroyed by manufacturing processes, and what is being manufactured is lousy, by and large." Kilgore tells the trucker that he too used to be "a conservationist," but he has "given it up." "More power to Standard Oil," Kilgore yells. "Up your ass with Mobil gas." The trucker is confused. "You're kidding," he says.

Here, Kilgore's comment is obviously sarcastic but nonetheless true. Kilgore, like many people in American society, chooses to be apathetic about environmental damage because he believes the damage is too far gone to actually do something about it, so he continues his destructive behavior.

Kilgore tells the truck driver that "God isn't any conservationist," which would make anybody who tries to be one "sacrilegious." The driver is "impressed," and he can't think of a single story about conservation in the Bible. "Unless you want to count the story about the Flood," Kilgore says. "I can't tell if you're serious or not," the trucker says to Kilgore. "I won't know myself until I find out whether *life* is serious or not," Kilgore answers.

Kilgore's comment about the Bible and conservation is absurd, but it points to those who use the Bible to justify wrongdoing. The Biblical story of Ham and his sons has long since been used to excuse racism and slavery, and by attempting to do the same with the environment, Vonnegut points out how ridiculous this defense really is.


As they drive, Kilgore makes up a story called "Gilgongo!" about a planet where there is "too much creation going on." In the story, a man is honored for killing a species of "darling little panda bears." In their language, "Gilgongo" means "extinct," and since there are "too many species on the planet," it is their objective to make as many species "Gilgongo" as possible. As they go about their business trying to kill everything, the planet is "suffocated at last by a living blanket" made of "passenger pigeons and eagles and Bermuda Erns and whooping cranes."

"Gilongo!" again reflects Vonnegut's argument regarding the effects of overpopulation on the destruction of the planet. The planet's suffocation by living birds is ironic since birds, particularly the Bermuda Ern which became extinct in Kilgore's childhood and caused his "deep pessimism," have been suffocated and killed by humankind's pollution.

CHAPTER 11

At the Holiday Inn, Dwayne sleeps late and goes down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. He sits alone in the empty dining room, except for Cyprian Ukwende, who sit a few feet away. Dwayne knows where he is now. He looks out on Midland City. The land is "treeless" and "flat," but he assumes that most places are. He touches the lapel of his jacket and feels a button fastened there. He looks at it. "Support the Arts," it reads. He has seen others in town wearing similar buttons and he knows they are to promote the arts center.

Midland City is "treeless" and "flat" because capitalism and manufacturing processes have stripped the land for profits, which negatively effects local ecosystems and the environment. Dwayne's assumption that all places are likewise stripped reflects the widespread practice in American society of making profits at the expense of the environment.

Dwayne thinks about Sugar Creek, a small river that flows through Midland City that floods every "now and then." Midland City is "so flat" that flooding is rare, but occasionally the creek "brims over silently" and "forms a vast **mirror** in which children might safely play." Dwayne silently whispers, "Sugar Creek" and finishes his breakfast.

When Kilgore's theory of mirrors as portals to another universe is employed here, the mirror on the surface of Sugar Creek becomes a door to a universe where creeks and rivers aren't dump sites for industrial waste and pollution.

Dwayne "dares to suppose that he is no longer mentally diseased" and walks out into the parking lot. He can see his dealership across the street, but the asphalt has become "a sort of trampoline." Dwayne steps onto the trampoline asphalt and begins making sinking steps in the direction of his dealership. He looks around to see if anyone is watching and finds Cyprian Ukwende standing on the sidewalk. "Nice day," Ukwende says.

Dwayne is implied to be having a mental break, yet even Cyprian Ukwende, a doctor, pretends not to notice and doesn't say a thing or offer to help. Dr. Ukwende is the very person society has charged with their well-being, and even he avoids the awkward subject of mental illness.

As Dwayne moves towards the dealership "from dimple to dimple," he sees a young black man polishing cars in the parking lot. He smiles "blindingly" at Dwayne and continues to polish. The man has just been released from prison in Shepherdstown and is "free at last!" He has spent most of his life in orphanages, juvenile homes, and prisons, but he is out now and looking for work. Dwayne thinks the man is a hallucination.

The young black man's life has been bleak thus far, which reflects how limited the opportunities are for black people in America, as well as the problems that stem from uneven wealth distribution. The young black man has been trapped all his life in a cycle of poverty that is impossible to climb out of, no matter how many cars he polishes.

For the young black man, "life is not worth living." His desire to live is "feeble," and he thinks the "planet is terrible." Most of his life has been spent in cages, but he dreams of a "better world." Whenever he closes his eyes, he can see the name of this "better world" written inside his head. It says, "FAIRY LAND."

Again, the young black man's desire for a "better world" reflects the systemic and institutionalized racism present in American society. Oppression and discrimination are so prominent that he can only escape them his dreams.

"Good morning," the young black man says to Dwayne. He tells Dwayne he has seen many of his ads and that he would love to work for him. "Oh?" says Dwayne. "Our names are so close," the man says to him, "it's the good Lord telling us *both* what to do." Dwayne doesn't ask his name. "My name, sir," the man offers, "is Wayne Hoobler." As Dwayne walks away, Vonnegut interrupts. "Hoobler," Vonnegut says, "is a common Nigger name" in Midland City.

Here, Vonnegut again holds up a mirror to force readers to face the ugliness of racism. There is very little difference between Dwayne and Wayne outside of the way society views them, yet their lives couldn't be more different. Dwayne prides himself on racial tolerance, but he doesn't even bother ask Wayne his name when offered. Like many Americans, Dwayne actively denies racism but acts in a way that perpetuates it.

Dwayne walks into his dealership and "the ground isn't blooping underneath him anymore." Now, however, he is confronted with the confusing sight of palm trees and coconuts. Dwayne has forgotten all about "Hawaiian Week," which is puzzling enough, but then Harry LeSabre walks by wearing a "lettuce-green leotard, straw sandals, a grass skirt, and a pink T-shirt" that says: "MAKE LOVE NOT WAR." Dwayne looks at Harry, astonished. "Aloha," Harry says.

Dwayne's confusion is a product of his deteriorating mental health and is another obvious cry for help that goes unnoticed. Furthermore, Harry's use of the word "Aloha" also highlights the postmodern understanding of the arbitrary nature of language. "Aloha," which means both hello and goodbye, implies that words are random and not rooted in absolute meaning.

CHAPTER 12

Meanwhile, Kilgore is still riding with the truck driver just outside Philadelphia. Kilgore has forgotten the trucker's name, but he asks him about his truck. "The tractor alone cost twenty-eight thousand dollars," and it has a "three hundred and twenty-four horsepower Cummins Diesel engine." The truck is owned by the driver's brother-in-law, and on the side of the trailer is written "PYRAMID" in tall letters. "Why would anybody in the business of highspeed transportation name his business and his trucks after buildings which haven't moved an eighth of an inch since Christ was born?" Kilgore asks the driver. "He liked the *sound* of it," the man answers.

Kilgore's fixation on the word "pyramid" again underscores the postmodern understanding of the randomness of language. The driver's brother-in-law chooses the name Pyramid for his business for completely arbitrary reasons, as it has nothing to do with trucks. The word "pyramid" for a business name also points to the idea of a pyramid scheme, which is a business model (illegal in the US) that hinges on recruiting new members rapidly rather than selling a lot of product.

The truck driver asks Kilgore if he is married. "Three times," Kilgore answers. Kilgore tells the driver about his son who "is a man now." Kilgore's son, Leo, left to join the military when he was a teenager, but he wrote Kilgore a letter before he left. "I pity you," Leo said in the letter. "You've crawled up your own asshole and died." Trout hasn't heard from Leo in years, but a few years back two F.B.I. agents knocked on his door. "Your boy's in bad trouble," they told Kilgore. Leo had committed "high treason" and abandoned the military to join the Viet Cong.

Kilgore's bad relationship with his son and his three failed marriages are directly related to the "deep pessimism" he feels due to the extinction of the Bermuda Erns during his childhood. His father studied the birds in Bermuda and Kilgore was forced to watch them die. This is why Leo "pities" Kilgore—the destruction of the planet has turned him into a hateful man.

CHAPTER 13

After his unexpected encounter with Harry, Dwayne finally makes it to the safety of his office. "This is a very tough day, for some reason," Dwayne tells Francine. "Keep everything simple. Keep anybody the least bit nutty out of here." Francine agrees and tells Dwayne that the twins, Kyle and Lyle, are waiting in his inner office. They have come to talk about a problem at the cave.

Here, Dwayne explicitly tells Francine that he is having a "very tough day," yet she ignores this as well. It's also ironic that Dwayne wants nothing to do with people who are "the least bit nutty," which gestures to the stigma surrounding mental illness in America.

Kyle and Lyle are Dwayne's twin stepbrothers, and the three of them jointly own the Sacred Miracle Cave, a local tourist attraction and the twins' only source of income. Dwayne has stepbrothers because after he was adopted, something was "triggered" inside his adoptive parents' bodies "which made it possible for them to have children after all. This is a common phenomenon."

As a child, Dwayne grew up feeling illegitimate compared to Kyle and Lyle—the biological children of his parents. Dwayne never felt like he belonged, which the novel implies is where his struggles with depression and mental illness began.

"Them bubbles is halfway up to the *Cathedral* now," says Lyle. "The way they're coming, they'll be up to *Moby Dick* in a week or two." This makes perfect sense to Dwayne. A small stream naturally runs through the cave, and it has become polluted with industrial waste that makes bubbles the size of "ping-pong balls." The *Cathedral*, a large opening in the cave, is filled with stalagmites and stalactites, and near the top is a large boulder, painted white to resemble Moby Dick, the Great White Whale.

The pollution taking over the Sacred Miracle Cave is evidence of the industrial waste that Vonnegut argues is directly to blame for the destruction of the planet. Here, instead of lamenting the environment itself, Kyle and Lyle are more worried about lost revenue *because of the destroyed environment, which again underscores the negative effects of capitalism on the environment.*


Lyle and Kyle had taken their Browning Automatic Shotguns and riddled the cave with shotgun shells, but it did nothing to diminish the bubbles. "They let loose a stink you wouldn't believe," Lyle says. The bubbles smell "like athlete's foot," and even the ventilation system can't cleanse the air of the stink. The Sacred Miracle Cave is nearly ruined—the paint is blistering and most of the attractions are buried under mounds of toxic bubbles.

Again, the smell of "athlete's foot" is symbolic of humanity's negative effect on the environment. The waste in the cave has been purposefully dumped there, and while Kyle and Lyle don't know this, it is proof that humankind alone is to blame for pollution and the destruction of the planet.

Deep inside the cave is an attraction made of several statues chained together. The statues depict runaway slaves, and as the story goes, they hid in the cave as they escaped the slavery of the South and headed North. Tourists come from miles around to see the cave, but the story is fake. Dwayne didn't discover the cave until 1937, and even then, his stepfather had to blow it open with dynamite.

The fake story of the slaves is another example of the exploitation of black people. Lyle and Kyle, two white men, use the story of slavery as a means to make more money, which is dishonest and unethical.

The Sacred Miracle Cave sits on the property that Dwayne's step-father came to own when he moved to Midland City. The property, known as Bluebird Farm, was originally owned by a freed slave name Josephus Hoobler. Josephus's descendants ran the farm until the Great Depression when it was foreclosed on by the bank. Around this time, Dwayne's step-father was hit by a car. The white man driving the car had purchased the farm, and it was awarded to Dwayne's step-father in an out-of-court settlement. Dwayne's step-father "contemptuously" referred to the farm as a "God damn Nigger farm."

Dwayne's stepfather serves as the personification of racism. His intolerance is open and ugly, and he does not try to hide or temper it. He hates proudly, and in this way, Vonnegut implies that racism in American is equally obvious and ugly. While some racism in America can be passive and underhanded, Dwayne's stepfather represents those who loudly profess their hate for all to hear. Racism in Vonnegut's novel, like racism in real life, is impossible to ignore.

CHAPTER 14

The truck driver and Kilgore make their way into West Virginia, which has been destroyed by coal mining. Massive holes are collapsing into one another and the hills and mountains have become so unstable that they crumble into the valleys below. The state is "demolished," and now most of the coal is gone. The demolition of West Virginia was approved by "the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the State Government, which drew their power form the people."

When Vonnegut mentions that the demolition of West Virginia was approved by the government which in turn draws it power from the people, he essentially argues that the destruction of the planet is the fault of the people. As the people have caused the pollution, Vonnegut argues that they deserve to live with it—or die because of it if that indeed is the consequence.

Kilgore supposes that all the heat from the coal has escaped into outer space, but "like most science-fiction writers," Kilgore knows nothing about science. The heat from the coal requires an atmosphere to travel, and beyond the Earth's atmosphere is "an all-but-perfect vacuum." The size of the Earth's atmosphere "relative to the planet isn't even as thick as the skin of an apple."

Vonnegut's comparison of the atmosphere to the skin of an apple underscores just how fragile the environment really is. The vacuum beyond the atmosphere means that pollution has nowhere to go but linger near the delicate atmosphere.

The truck driver stops at a nearby McDonald's restaurant and Kilgore goes inside for a cup of coffee. Kilgore sits down next to an old coal miner and asks him how he feels about working in an industry "whose business is to destroy the countryside." The old man turns to him and says he is "usually too tired to care." Most of West Virginia is owned by the Rosewater Coal and Iron Company, and they also own what is under the ground as well, which means they have the right to "tear up" anything to get to what they own. "Don't matter if you care," the old man says, "if you don't own what you care about."

The coalminer is "too tired to care" about the environment because he has enough trouble just trying to survive day-by-day as a poor person. Putting a roof over his family's head and feeding them everyday takes precedence over the environment. Here, the negative effects of capitalism and the unequal distribution of wealth are twofold—it leads to both the destruction of the planet and the destruction of society.

Back on the road, the truck driver asks Kilgore why he wants to go to Midland City. Kilgore lies and tells him that his sister is sick. "Midland City is the asshole of the Universe," the driver says. "If it isn't in Midland City, it's in Libertyville, Georgia." The driver had been jailed for speeding in Libertyville, where the main source of industry was pulping up old paper to make new paper. "The unloading process was sloppy," the driver says, "so there were pieces of books and magazines and so blowing all over town."

The truck driver is the first character to refer to Midland City as "the asshole of the Universe," as Rabo Karabekian refers to it in the same way. This is a fitting description, since Midland City is the dumping site where Vonnegut unloads all the garbage in his head, like pollution, racism, and capitalism.

"Anyway," the truck driver says, "they had so many books in Libertyville, they used books for toilet paper in the jail." Since he had been arrested on a Friday, the driver had nothing to do the entire weekend but sit and read toilet paper. The driver read one story, he tells Kilgore, about a "crazy" planet where the government used a "roulette wheel" to assign the worth of art. Kilgore has a sudden attack of "déjà vu." The toilet paper in Libertyville, Georgia, was Kilgore's book, *This Year's Masterpiece*.

Libertyville's use of books as toilet paper, especially Kilgore's books, reflects the subjective value of art. Eliot Rosewater has just placed ridiculous value on the very same art Libertyville views as disposable. In this vein, the value that Rosewater applies to Kilgore's writing is just as random as spinning a roulette wheel.

This Year's Masterpiece takes place on a planet named Bagnialto, where a government official "spins a wheel of chance" once a year to determine the cash value of art. One year, a cobbler named Gooz paints a picture of his cat; **Gooz's painting** is deemed to be worth the equivalent of one billion dollars on Earth. The government burns all the art said to be worthless by the wheel, but then they learn that the wheel is "rigged," and the government official responsible for spinning the wheel commits suicide. Kilgore doesn't tell the truck driver that he is the author of his toilet paper, and they drive on in silence.

Here, Vonnegut implies that the value of all art is arbitrary and assigned in absurd ways. Like Gooz's painting, Kilgore's art is equally adored and devalued for completely arbitrary and ridiculous reasons. By the end of Kilgore's life, his writing will be revered because an eccentric millionaire found worth in it, not because it is inherently valuable.

Incidentally, as Kilgore makes his way to Midland City, he unknowingly passes through the part of West Virginia where Dwayne's stepparents originally came from. Before coming to Midland City after the First World War, Dwayne's stepparents' last name was Hoobler; however, when they moved to Midland City, where many of the city's black citizens were named Hoobler, they promptly change their name to Hoover. "It was embarrassing," Dwayne's stepfather said. "Everybody up here naturally assumed Hoobler was a *Nigger* name."

Dwayne's stepfather's desire to change the family name from Hoobler to Hoover is another reflection of racism in American society. He doesn't want to be associated with the black community in any way, and even despite the fact that Dwayne's stepfather is white and would never be confused for a black man, he nevertheless wants to distance himself as much as possible.

CHAPTER 15

Back at his Pontiac dealership, Dwayne finally remembers that it is Hawaiian Week. His mind is clearing, and the parking lot is "no longer a trampoline," but he has developed "incipient echolalia," which compels him to repeat every last word he hears. Dwayne leaves his office and drives (in a brand-new Pontiac) to one of his Burger Chef restaurants for lunch.

Dwayne leaves his dealership in a brand new car and heads for lunch in a restaurant which he owns, and this further reflects capitalism and the unequal distribution of wealth. Many people don't have access to new cars, but Dwyane has several at his disposal, and while others can't afford to eat, Dwayne owns several restaurants. This moment is reminiscent of when Dwayne rested in his empty lot; by driving a car from his dealership and dining at his restaurant, he revels in the wealth that he has amassed.

Dwayne's waitress at Burger Chef, Patty Keene, is a seventeen-year-old girl working to pay off her father's hospital bills. He father is dying of colon cancer, and in America, "where everybody is expected to pay his own bills for everything," getting sick is "one of the most expensive things a person can do."

Patty Keene also underscores the unequal distribution of wealth in American society. Whereas Dwayne's life is one of excess and greed, Patty's father is so poor he must fight simply to stay alive and get the medical care he requires.

Dwayne isn't sexually attracted to Patty, although he does appreciate that she is pretty. Patty is "stupid on purpose." She had programmed herself, "in the interest of survival," to be an "agreeing machine instead of a thinking machine." Patty rarely thinks for herself—all she does is "discover what other people are thinking, and then [she] thinks that, too."

Here, Vonnegut again employs the people-as-machines narrative. As America's sexist society assumes that Patty, a pretty young woman, must also be stupid, she essentially reprograms herself to align with what is expected of her. Vonnegut implies that this is not only ridiculous but also entirely unproductive and unhelpful.

Patty eyes Dwayne. He "can solve so many of her problems with the money and power he has," and she envisions a "magic wand" that Dwayne passes over her life, magically making everything better. Being in the presence of Dwayne makes Patty feel as if she is in the presence of a "supernatural" power. "When you came in," Patty says to Dwayne, "[everybody] just buzzed and buzzed." Dwayne looks at her blankly. "Buzzed," he says.

The fact that Dwayne can solve so many of Patty's problems with his money again underscores the unequal distribution of wealth in American society. Patty does not wish for money simply so that she can live a life leisure; she wishes for money so that her father can have the opportunity to live at all.

"I guess that's not the right word," Patty says. Like most people in Midland City, Patty is "used to apologizing for her use of language." English teachers fail those who don't "speak like English aristocrats," and if students can't "love or understand incomprehensible novels and poems and plays about people long ago and far away, such as *Ivanhoe*," they are deemed "unworthy" to speak or write English. Black people in Midland City do not follow this rule. They speak English how ever they want, and "they refuse to read books they can't understand—on the grounds that they can't understand them."

Here, Vonnegut again implies that art is subjective and that its worth is arbitrary. American English teachers have randomly assigned value to books no one understands about people they can't relate to, and they have set a standard based on those books. Vonnegut suggests that this is a terrible test of knowledge, and he applauds the black community for refusing to partake in such ridiculousness.

Patty herself failed English in high school when she failed to appreciate *Ivanhoe*, and she was put into a "remedial" course where she was forced to *The Good Earth*, a book "about Chinamen." Around this time, she "lost her virginity" when she was raped by Don Breedlove, a white gas-conversion unit installer, behind the Bannister Memorial Fieldhouse after a basketball game. Patty never told a soul because her father was busy dying and "there was enough trouble already."

Patty doesn't understand Ivanhoe *or* The Good Earth *because she can't relate to them. In this way, their meaning and importance as literature, or art, depends on the person reading them; to Patty, these books have to value, but to the high school English teachers, these books are significant enough to be part of the standard curriculum.*

The Bannister Memorial Fieldhouse is named for George Hickman Bannister, a local high school kid who was killed playing football on Thanksgiving Day. George's **tombstone**, the largest in Midland City's cemetery, is a tall marble obelisk with a football on top. For many years, the obelisk was the tallest structure in town, and The George Hickman Bannister law prohibited any taller structures from being built. The law had to be "junked" years later to allow for radio towers. No one thinks about George Hickman Bannister anymore and his family has long since left the area.

Vonnegut frequently explores the concept of "gone but not forgotten," and the character of George suggests that, at times, gone really does *mean forgotten. Midland City has gone to great lengths to keep George's memory alive, but they forget about him anyway. The radio towers that cause George's law to be "junked" carry connotations of capitalism and advertising, and by comparison, George's memory is merely something to be thrown out like garbage.*

Dwayne continues to repeat the last word of each of Patty's sentences, but she doesn't seem to notice or mind. It matters very little what Dwayne says. Everyone in Midland City "has a clearly defined part to play," and each person lives up to those expectations. If a person stops living up to expectation, "because of bad chemicals" or any other thing, the town just goes "on imagining that the person is living up to expectation anyway."

Patty's failure to acknowledge Dwayne's symptoms again emphasizes society's feigned ignorance regarding mental illness. It connects to Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative and implies that society is conditioned, or programmed, to avoid such issues. The novel implies that Patty notices; she has simply been programmed to believe the subject of mental health is taboo and not to be commented on.

On the way back to the dealership, Dwayne passes a construction site where a crew of men are digging massive holes in Midland City. Dwayne approaches the biggest piece of equipment he sees and asks the "white workman how many horsepower drives the machine." The workman isn't sure. "I don't know how many horsepower, but I know what we call it," the workman says. "We call in *The Hundred-Nigger Machine*." The workman's reference is "to a time when black men had done most of the heavy digging in Midland City."

The workman's comment is another example of racism in America. Not only does he use a racial slur which in itself is demeaning, he further dehumanizes people of color by conflating slaves with machinery. The workman's racist comment both implicitly and explicitly highlights how pervasive racism is in American society.

At the dealership, Francine is hard at work. Dwayne goes into his office and calls her, even though she is sitting just outside the door. "Francine?" says Dwayne. "I am going to ask you to do something I have never asked you to do before. Promise me you'll say yes." Francine promises, and Dwayne asks her to go with him to the hotel in Shepherdstown.

Like Patty, Francine is also programmed to be "an agreeing machine." She agrees to Dwayne's request before even knowing what it is because, as a woman in a sexist society, she has been conditioned to do so.

Francine doesn't mind going—she thinks it is "her duty" to do so—but she must first convince Gloria Browning, the Service Department cashier, to man her desk, which is known as the "Nerve Center" of the dealership. Gloria isn't up to doing Francine's job, as she has just had a hysterectomy at the age of twenty-five after a "botched abortion." Ironically, the father of her "destroyed fetus" was Don Breedlove, the married father of three who raped Patty Keene behind the George Bannister Memorial Fieldhouse.

Again, Francine believes it is "her duty" to do as Dwayne says because she has been programmed by society to obey and cater to men. Gloria' hysterectomy, presumably, is due to having undergone an illegal abortion. Vonnegut implies that the tragedy of this is secondary to Gloria's civil rights—or free will—being taken from her.

Gloria finally agrees to sit at Francine's desk. "I don't have nerve enough to commit suicide," she says, "so I might as well do anything anybody says—in the service of mankind." Dwayne and Francine take separate cars to the Shepherdstown, where they meet at the Quality Motor Court and have sex in the middle of the afternoon. Francine's husband had been killed in Vietnam not long before Dwayne's wife, Celia, committed suicide.

Both Gloria's comment and the mention of Celia's death again shines a light on suicide and mental health. Gloria's comment is sarcastic but nevertheless is rooted in some truth; she appears to be struggling with her emotions after her recent abortion and hysterectomy, and it seems to be affecting her mental health.

Francine and Dwayne talk about the local prison in Shepherdstown, and Francine marvels at how most of the guards are white and most of the prisoners are black. "You know what I keep thinking?" Francine says. "This would be a very good location for a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise." Immediately, Dwayne thinks that Francine is asking him to buy her a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise, and he grows angry. "Let's keep love-making and presents separate, O.K.?" he tells her.

The fact that most of the guards are white and most of the prisoners are black in the Shepherdstown prison is another reflection of racism in America, and it is further evidence of the mass incarceration of people of color. The widespread imprisonment of black Americans bolsters racist stereotypes of black men as criminals.

Francine is shocked. She doesn't know what Dwayne is talking about. "Every woman is a whore," Dwayne tells her, "and every whore has her price." Francine's "price" is the cost of a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise, "which would be well over one hundred thousand dollars by the time adequate parking and exterior lighting and all that is taken into consideration." Francine begins to cry. She only suggested the restaurant because most of the prisoners are black, and she is thinking of their relatives when they come to visit. "I thought how much black people like fried chicken," Francine says. "So you want me to open a Nigger joint?" Dwayne asks.

While Dwayne's callous racial slur is an obvious reflection of racism in American society, Francine's reliance on stereotypes to pigeonhole an entire group of people is just as racist. Not only does Francine assume that black men are criminals simply because they are black, she also assumes that all black people love fried chicken.

In the meantime, Harry is at home crying as well. He is sure that Dwayne knows he is a "transvestite," and he has gone home to cry in his bed. Harry and his wife, Grace, are rich, having made a pile of money in Xerox stocks, which sit in their safety deposit box at the bank and continue to make money. "There is a lot of money magic like that going on."

Vonnegut's reference to the "money magic" enjoyed by Harry and Grace highlights how easily they came into their wealth. Most people work hard their entire life and never earn that much money, and this further emphasizes the evils of capitalism and the unequal distribution of wealth.

"Fuck Dwayne Hoover," Grace tells Harry, "and fuck Midland City. Let's sell the God damn Xerox stock and buy a condominium on Maui." Harry continues to cry. "Can the reindeer hear you?" Harry asks. "Fuck the reindeer," Grace says. "Reindeer" is Harry and Grace's "code word" for their black maid. In fact, they called all the black people in Midland City "reindeer." The Midland City Police Department and the Midland County Sheriff's Department, which are composed mainly of white men, have "racks and racks of sub-machine guns and twelve-gauge automatic shotguns for an open season on reindeer, which is bound to come."

Grace and Harry's use of the word "reindeer" to describe black people in Midland City again reflects the obvious racism in American society; however, it also emphasizes the postmodern opinion that language and meaning is arbitrary, as Harry and Grace assign racist meaning to an arbitrary word.

As Francine cries, Dwayne begins to regret his outburst. "I'm so confused," he says and asks Francine to hold him. She agrees, and he tells her about the time he visited the headquarters of the Pontiac Division of General Motors. Dwayne was given a tour of the facility, and the tour stopped at the department of "Destructive Testing." In that department, the workers did "everything you're not supposed to do to a car," including breaking windshields and mirrors and staging "head-on collisions." They *tried* to destroy cars to see how much destruction they could take before failing. "I couldn't help wondering," Dwayne says to Francine, "if that was what God put me on Earth for—to find out how much a man could take without breaking."

Dwayne's story about the "Destructive Testing" room harkens to both capitalism and environmentalism in that it involves a large corporation that undeniably has a negative impact environmentally, but it also highlights Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative. In his failing mental health, and because he has been forced to endure so much tragedy, Dwayne is convinced he is a human prototype for "Destructive Testing."

"I've lost my way," Dwayne says to Francine. He wants to talk to someone about his feelings, but he has already talked to everyone in Midland City. Francine suggests a doctor, but Dwayne refuses. "What about all these painters and writers and composers coming to town?" she says in reference to the Arts Festival. "You're right!" Dwayne cries. "The Festival could give me a brand new viewpoint on life!"

Through Dwayne's comment about art, Vonnegut again implies that society has placed art on a pedestal. Dwayne needs a doctor, not an artist, but he believes that art will reveal to him the meaning of life, which Vonnegut argues is not the case.

CHAPTER 16

Kilgore, who has since hitched a ride with a man driving a Ford Galaxie, is making his way closer to Midland City. Kilgore asks the man what is like to "steer something like the Milky Way," but the man doesn't hear him. Kilgore looks to a fire extinguisher mounted in the car that has the brand name displayed prominently. The word "EXCELSIOR" is written on it and Kilgore is confused. The word means "*higher* in a dead language" and has nothing to do with fire. "Why would anybody name a fire extinguisher *Excelsior*?" he asks. "Somebody must have liked the *sound* of it," the driver answers.

Here, Vonnegut uses capitalism and advertising to underscore the arbitrary nature of language. The man's car has nothing to do with the Milky Way, yet they share the same name. Similarly, the fire extinguisher has nothing to do with height, but the word "excelsior" describes them both. The relationship between words and meaning is subjective and arbitrary, which makes all language and the meaning it expresses equally arbitrary.

Kilgore begins to thumb through his novel, *Now It Can Be Told*, which is the book that "will soon turn Dwayne into a homicidal maniac." In the book, all creatures in the universe are "fully-programmed robots," but the Creator of the Universe wants to test a creature with free will, so he creates one man—The Man—who has "the ability to make up his own mind." The book is in the form of a letter written by the Creator of the Universe to The Man.

Through Kilgore's book, a form of art, Vonnegut explores what humankind has accomplished using their free will, and it doesn't appear that he is impressed with the result. There is little beauty or goodness in Breakfast of Champions, *and by extension, Vonnegut argues there is little in the real world as well.*

The Creator of the Universe brings The Man to a "virgin planet" with a large and "soupy sea." On the planet, "The Man is Adam and the sea is Eve." The Man often swims in Eve, but he finds her "too soupy," so he jumps into an icy stream to refresh himself. As The Man comes up from the cold water he yells, "Cheese!" "Why did you yell, 'Cheese'?" the Creator's robotic messenger asks. "Because I *felt* like it, you stupid machine," The Man replies.

Again, The Man's arbitrary use of the word "Cheese" suggests that words and their meanings are not rooted in any inherent or universal understanding. The Creator waits with bated breath to hear what The Man will say, but he seems disappointed with "Cheese!" Likewise, Vonnegut implies that he is disappointed with humankind as well.

At the end of *Now It Can Be Told* is a picture of The Man's **tombstone** as it stands on the virgin planet. Vonnegut includes a drawing of the tombstone and it reads: "NOT EVEN THE CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE KNEW WHAT THE MAN WAS GOING TO SAY NEXT / PERHAPS THE MAN WAS A BETTER UNIVERSE IN ITS INFANCY."

Through the inscription on The Man's tombstone, Vonnegut suggests that the idea of humankind is better than what has come of it, which again suggests his disappointment in society.

CHAPTER 17

Bunny Hoover, "Dwayne's homosexual son," is busy getting ready for work. He plays piano at the lounge of the Holiday Inn, and his shift is starting soon. Bunny lives alone in a "flophouse"—the old Fairchild Hotel located in the "most dangerous part of Midland City." Bunny is "pale" and "unhealthy," and he spends most of his time avoiding people.

Bunny's reclusive and antisocial behavior raises the question of if he struggles with mental health issues as well. If that's the case, this further reflects the frequency with which mental illness is present in American society.

Bunny can handle his job at the Holiday Inn because "he isn't really there." He can leave his body as he sits at the piano "by means of Transcendental Meditation." Bunny prepares for his shift by practicing his mediation. He slows his heart and breathing and clears his mind, then he brushes his hair with a brush his mother, Celia, gave him when he made the rank of Cadet Colonel in military school long ago.

Bunny's use of "Transcendental Meditation," is the only way he can effectively cope with his negative emotions and what is implied to be depression. In the absence of any other form of meaningful assistance, Bunny must take care of himself.

Bunny had been sent to military school when he was just ten years old, after he told Dwayne "that he wished he was a woman instead of a man." Military schools are institutions "devoted to homicide and absolutely humorless obedience," and this is where Bunny spent the latter part of his childhood. "Listen:" Bunny spent eight years "of uninterrupted sports, buggery and Fascism" at the school, and each time Bunny came home, he was adorned with new medals and accolades. "Buggery," Vonnegut clarifies, consists "of sticking one's penis in somebody else's asshole or mouth."

Dwayne sends Bunny to military school in what appears to be an attempt to "cure" him of his homosexuality. Ironically, the very thing that Dwayne wants to avoid (Bunny having sex with men) is tolerated and even encouraged at the school. The school simply calls it "buggery" and considers it something different entirely. This difference in words with the same basic meaning again reflects the arbitrary nature of language.

Each time Bunny came home with more medals, Celia would be so proud, and then she should would tell Bunny that Dwayne was "a monster." Of course, Dwayne was not a monster, "it was all in her head," but Bunny didn't know this. Bunny never knew until she "knocked herself off with Drāno" that his mother was "crazy as a bedbug." Vonnegut again interrupts the story. "My mother was, too," Vonnegut writes.

Vonnegut draws increased attention to mental illness by writing about his personal struggles with suicide and depression. Mental illness isn't merely a trope in Vonnegut's novel, it is a major part of his actual life and experiences.

Both Celia and Vonnegut's mother couldn't "stand to have [their] picture taken." Whenever anyone aimed a camera at them, they would fall to their knees and conceal their faces with their hands. "It was a scary and pitiful thing to see," Vonnegut writes.

Vonnegut's story about his own mother's struggle with mental illness makes his message even more powerful. The image of Vonnegut's mother cowering in fear over a camera commands increased attention and reminds readers that this is a problem that affects real people, not merely characters in a book.

Luckily, Celia had taught Bunny how to play the piano because his military training was "useless." The military ultimately kicked him out because of his sexuality and "didn't want to put up with such love affairs." Now, Bunny lives at the old Fairchild Hotel on "Skid Row" in Midland City. Every neighborhood in America has a Skid Row—"a place where people who don't have any friends or relatives or property or usefulness or ambition are supposed to go."

Bunny's relegation to Skid Row with the rest of Midland City's poor is another reflection of America's unequal distribution of wealth. Furthermore, Bunny's dismissal from the military because they don't "want to put up with" his homosexuality again underscores the arbitrary nature of language. In the military, homosexual acts are tolerated and even encouraged in the form of "buggery," which they consider completely different and therefore acceptable.

People who live on Skid Row are "treated with disgust," and it is the police department's main objective to keep people from Skid Row out of nicer parts of town. People living on Skid Row can do whatever they please—if they do it on Skid Row. They are to "stay there and not bother anybody anywhere else—until they are murdered for thrills, or until they are frozen to death by the wintertime."

Again, the treatment of those on Skid Row emphasizes the despicable treatment of the poor in America. Like the mentally ill, the poor are marginalized and ignored with little care to whether they live or die.

CHAPTER 18

Kilgore is still in the Galaxie moving closer to Midland City, and four miles away, Dwayne sits in the cocktail lounge of the Holiday Inn. Bunny sits playing the piano, but the two men do not acknowledge each other. Outside, Wayne Hoobler continues to loiter around Dwayne's Pontiac dealership.

Vonnegut mentions specific makes of cars, which again points to capitalism, advertising, and consumerism in American society. Here, Vonnegut mentions both Ford and Pontiac, two huge manufacturers of American automobiles, which he further implies are directly responsible for the destruction of the planet.

Wayne Hoobler watches as the traffic passes. The sun is setting and many people in Midland City are heading home from work. Wayne supposes he may die of exposure if he sleeps outdoors tonight. Wayne doesn't have much experience being outside since he has spent most of his life locked up. Wayne "misses the clash of steel doors" and "the bread and stew and the pitchers of milk and coffee." He watches as a milk truck passes on the interstate.

Wayne Hooble once again reflects the effects of racism on America's black men. Society has pigeonholed Wayne as a criminal, and as such, he has been institutionalized. Even Wayne believes he belongs in prison, and therefore he "misses the clash of steel doors." He is most comfortable behind bars, where at least he is guaranteed shelter and food every day.

Even though Wayne is not happy, he smiles to "show off his teeth." The Adult Correctional Institution at Shepherdstown has a wonderful dental program. Since ex-convicts have trouble finding employment "because of their appearance," the prison offers state-of-the-art dental care. The "theory" is that "good looks begin with good teeth," so Midland City is crawling with ex-cons who have beautiful dental work. Whenever anyone is arrested with particularly dazzling teeth, the police ask: "All right, boy—how many years you spend in Shepherdstown?"

Ironically, while the prison claims to help prisoners through the dental program by making them more presentable, and therefore more likely to find employment, it actually hurts them. The dental program actually makes the prisoners stand out, which keeps them from future employment and hinders their ability to reenter society. As all of the prisoners in Shepherdstown are black, this is a prime example of institutionalized racism—the practice of the prison helps to ensure that people of color are viewed as criminals by society.

Back in the bar, a man enters wearing a pair of sunglasses. "I have come to the Arts Festival incognito," Vonnegut writes, "to watch a confrontation between two human beings I have created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout." The lenses of Vonnegut's glasses are "silvered" and appear as "**mirrors**" to anyone looking at him. "Where other people in the cocktail lounge have eyes," Vonnegut says, "I have two holes into another universe. I have *leaks*."

Vonnegut refers to his mirrored glasses as "leaks" because they serve as a portal to another universe—the universe that Vonnegut creates with his characters and his book, a form of art.

"This is a very bad book you're writing," Vonnegut says to himself. "I know," he answers. "You're afraid you'll kill yourself the way your mother did," he says. "I know," Vonnegut answers.

Here, Vonnegut literally talks to himself, which he implies is a symptom of his own mental illness as well as his own "cry for help."

Sitting alone in the dark behind his **leaks**, Vonnegut silently mouths the word "schizophrenia." Vonnegut is "fascinated" with this word. "I do not know for certain that I have this disease," Vonnegut says, but he had been "making himself hideously uncomfortable" by "refusing to believe what [his] neighbors believe." He is not quite as "uncomfortable" as he used to be. "I am better now," Vonnegut writes. "Word of honor: I am better now."

Again, by admitting his own struggles with mental illness, Vonnegut hopes to destigmatize mental disorders in American society. Vonnegut's claim that he is "better now" seems to be an effort to convince himself as much as his readers that he is no longer mentally ill.

Bonnie MacMahon, a "white cocktail waitress," walks by with a drink in her hand. She is about to serve it to Dwayne, whom she knows well. Bonnie and her husband have bought several Pontiacs from Dwayne over the years, but after Bonnie's husband lost their life savings opening a car wash in Shepherdstown, she was forced to take a job waiting tables. "Breakfast of Champions," Bonnie says as she places a martini in front of Dwayne.

Bonnie's use of the saying "Breakfast of Champions" simultaneously harkens to capitalism and underscores the arbitrary nature of language. Bonnie's definition for "Breakfast of Champions" has nothing to do with the trademarked breakfast cereal and instead describes a gin martini, which is neither breakfast nor a healthy snack.


Dwayne has come to the lounge hoping to find some "distinguished artists" to talk to. He wants to "discover whether they have truths about life which he has never heard before." He hopes that these "truths" will make his life worth living again and keep him out of the mental institution. Dwayne is deep in thought, and he doesn't notice when two artists, Beatrice Keedsler, a Gothic novelist, and Rabo Karabekian, a minimalist painter, enter the bar. "This *has* to be the asshole of the Universe," Rabo says to Beatrice as he looks around.

Vonnegut implies that Dwayne's search for the meaning of life at the arts festival is absurd. Dwayne assumes that art is a reflection of beauty and truth; however, Vonnegut argues that is an arbitrary expression of whatever the artist, or patron for that matter, desires. Art is completely subjective; therefore, it is incapable of imparting universal truth or beauty.

Back on the interstate, traffic has come to a stop and Kilgore gets out of the car to investigate. He realizes that the Holiday Inn is just up the road, so he decides to walk. Up the interstate a bit, Kilgore discovers that a car has collided with a milk truck. The driver and passenger of the car lay dead in Sugar Creek, where milk and blood begin to flow into the water, adding "to the composition of the sinking ping-pong balls which are being manufactured in the bowels of the Sacred Miracle Cave."

The pollution that is clogging up Sacred Miracle Cave and flowing through Midland City via Sugar Creek reflects the widespread pollution present in American society. Kilgore can't go very far without encountering pollution of some kind, which reflects the rampant pollution present in the real world.

CHAPTER 19

"I am on par with the Creator of the Universe here in the dark in the cocktail lounge," Vonnegut says. As Bonnie MacMahon brings him another drink, she eyes him suspiciously. "Can you see anything in the dark, with your sunglasses on?" she asks. "The big show is inside my head," Vonnegut answers. She nods and goes back to the bar, where she tells the bartender, Harold Newcomb Wilbur, about their strange customer.

Vonnegut's statement that he is "on par with the Creator of the Universe" reflects his total control of his characters, similar to an engineer designing a machine. Because he has created them, he has the control to make them appear and behave in any way he pleases.

Harold stares at Vonnegut, and Vonnegut wants him to stop, but he can't force him. "Here is the thing about my control over the characters I create," Vonnegut says. "I can only guide their movements approximately, since they are such big animals. There is inertia to overcome." Vonnegut explains that he is not connected to his characters "by steel wires," but by "stale rubberbands." Vonnegut makes the telephone ring to distract Harold, so he won't kick him out.

The "inertia" that Vonnegut describes begins to unravel his people-as-machines narrative. Despite the fact that he has engineered them, Vonnegut isn't able to completely control his characters, which implies that actual people can't be controlled like machines either. Like actual people, Vonnegut's characters represent sentient human beings, with actual feelings and opinions.

Harold is the second most decorated veteran in Midland City. He was awarded several medals during the Second World War, "which was staged by robots so that Dwayne Hoover could give a free-willed reaction to such a holocaust." The phone is ringing because Vonnegut makes Ned Lingamon, the most decorated veteran in Midland City, call Harold. "Don't hang up," Ned says to Harold. "The cops got me down at City Jail. They only let me have one call, so I called you."

Again, Vonnegut's people-as-machines narrative creates an emotional distance that allows for atrocities such as war to be more easily accepted. Thinking of soldiers and wartime civilians as robots makes war crimes and other injustices more palatable to society, which both justifies and sustains these atrocities.

As Harold talks to Ned, Vonnegut draws a colorless representation of Rabo Karabekian's **painting**, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, on his tabletop. The Mildred Barry Memorial Center for the Arts has purchased the painting for fifty thousand dollars. The painting, which is twenty feet wide and sixteen feet high, is a green square with a "vertical stripe of dayglo orange reflecting tape." The cost of the painting is a "scandal," and the whole city is "outraged" that the center has paid so much for such a simple painting. "So am I," Vonnegut says.

Rabo's painting is symbolic of art's subjectivity. For whatever reason, both Rabo and the arts center have decided that the painting is worth a significant amount of money, yet it doesn't reflect any actual talent and is even described as childish. In this way, the value of Rabo's painting is determined in a completely arbitrary way, and is about making money, not revealing truth or beauty.

Beatrice Keedsler is "dismayed" that Rabo has been paid so much money. Still, she hides her feelings and converses politely with him. "This is a dreadful confession," she says to Rabo, "but I don't even know who St. Anthony was." Rabo tells her that he doesn't know either and doesn't really care. "You have no use for truth?" Beatrice asks. "You know what truth is?" says Rabo. "It's some crazy thing my neighbor believes. If I want to make friends with him, I ask him what he believes. He tells me, and I say, 'Yeah, yeah—ain't it the truth?'"

Here, Rabo implies that truth is not rooted in any universal understanding, but instead is something that people agree to in an attempt to be friendly. Rabo doesn't agree with his neighbor because he necessarily believes in his definition of truth; he does so to prove his friendship. Here, the definition of truth is based in convenience, not inherent meaning.

"I have no respect whatsoever for the creative works of either the painter or the novelist," Vonnegut says. Rabo, it seems, has "entered into a conspiracy with millionaires to make poor people feel stupid," and Beatrice has "joined hands with other old-fashioned storytellers" who believe life, like literature, has "lessons to be learned." It is because of artists like Rabo and Beatrice, Vonnegut says, that Americans "behave so abominably." Everyone is "doing their best to live like people invented in story books." So, writes Vonnegut, "I resolve to shun storytelling."

Vonnegut reveals his discontent with art and with storytelling as a form of art. He directly implies that art is arbitrary and meaningless, and that it is more about money than beauty or truth. He even directly blames art for the ugliness of society. Vonnegut's vow to "shun storytelling" is his motivation to write this antinovel, which parallels Kilgore's own attempt to show up at the festival a representation of a failed artist.

"Let others bring order to chaos," Vonnegut says. "I will bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done." If other writers did this, according to Vonnegut, then perhaps people "will understand that there is no order in the world arounds us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead."

Essentially, Vonnegut argues that since there is no truth or beauty to be found it the world, it likewise cannot be found in art and storytelling. Vonnegut adapts to the ugliness of the world by directly calling it out and attempting overcome it.

Bonnie brings Rabo another martini. "Breakfast of Champions," she says again as she places the drink in front of him. Rabo tells Bonnie that she said that the last time she brought him a martini. "I say it every time I give anybody a martini," Bonnie says. She tries to be friendly, since she works for tips, and even though she "detests" Rabo, she continues to smile.

Bonnie underscores the plight of the blue-collar worker. She hates many of her customers but is forced to smile in the name of making money, which is more evidence of American society's unequal distribution of wealth.

Rabo asks Bonnie about Mary Alice Miller, the girl on the cover of the program for the Festival. Mary Alice is the Queen of the Festival, and she is also an Olympic Gold Medalist and the Women's Two Hundred Meter Breast Stroke Champion of the World. She is a local celebrity, and her father had taught her to swim when she was just eight months old. "What kind of a man would turn his daughter into an outboard motor?" Rabo asks.

Whereas the people of Midland City find Mary Alice's story incredibly important to their collective identity, Rabo finds it complete nonsense. When he expresses this opinion, he simultaneously insults Midland City's entire population.

"And now comes the spiritual climax of this book," Vonnegut interrupts, "for it is at this point that I, the author, am suddenly transformed by what I have done so far." When Rabo questions Mary Alice Miller, he essentially questions Midland City as well, and makes the people worry that "their lives might be ridiculous." Rabo, "a man from out-of-town," has "ridiculed" their lives. "Oh yeah?" Bonnie yells. "Oh, yeah? You don't think much of Mary Alice Miller?" she asks. "Well, we don't think much of your painting. I've seen better pictures done by a five-year-old."

Vonnegut's "spiritual climax" again unravels much of the argument he has been making thus far. Vonnegut maintains that art is subjective and arbitrary, and therefore inherently meaningless, but he is brought to this "spiritual climax" through Rabo's art, which he has already admitted he doesn't respect. The fact that Vonnegut is moved to such a change through art suggests that art is not as meaningless as he claims.

"Listen," says Rabo. "I have read the editorial against my painting in your wonderful newspaper." Rabo is aware that Midland City doesn't like his **painting**, but he doesn't care. "The painting did not exist until I made it," he says, and it "shows everything about life which truly matters." It is a rendition of the "awareness of every animal," the "immaterial core" that is at the center of each living thing. He calls it an "unwavering band of light," and it is "all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery," he explains.

The meaning of Rabo's painting cannot be gleaned simply by looking at it, which implies that the connection between Rabo's painting and its meaning is completely arbitrary and created by Rabo for his convenience. Nevertheless, Rabo's explanation perfectly explains the "inertia" that makes Vonnegut's characters impossible to control, and as such, Vonnegut finds new value in the painting.

CHAPTER 20

"While my life is being renewed by the words of Rabo Karabekian," Vonnegut writes, Kilgore is standing in the interstate looking at the Holiday Inn. A small patch of Sugar Creek sits between the highway and the Holiday Inn, and Kilgore must cross it to get to the Festival. He takes off his socks and shoes and places one foot in the creek. Kilgore's foot is "coated at once with a clear plastic substance from the surface of the creek." He pulls his foot from the water and it instantly hardens, "sheathing his foot in a thin, skin-tight bootie resembling mother-of-pearl."

The polluted creek in Midland City again reflects the widespread pollution and destruction of the planet due to capitalism and the manufacturing process. Manufacturing has completely destroyed Sugar Creek, which Kilgore promptly ignores and wades through anyway. While this is obviously satirical, it still underscores society's tendency to ignore the obvious signs of pollution or react apathetically.

The plastic substance is industrial waste from Barrytron, Ltd., which manufactures "anti-personnel bombs for the Air Force." The new bomb scatters plastic, not metal, because "plastic is cheaper," but also because the plastic cannot be detected by x-ray. Of course, Barrytron doesn't know that they are polluting Sugar Creek; they had hired the Maritimo Brothers Construction Company to dump their waste. The company, which is "gangster-controlled," thought that disposing of Barrytron's waste sounded "complicated and busy," so they built a confusing system that "concealed a straight run of stolen sewer pipe running directly from Barrytron to Sugar Creek."

The Maritimo Brothers Construction Company is fully aware that they are harming the environment, but they simply don't care. They even go to the trouble to appear *to properly dispose of the waste, which implies that they are at least aware of the importance of properly disposing of industrial waste. Still, they completely disregard the environment and pollute the creek anyway, and they even do it with stolen pipes, which further reflects their unethical behavior and desire to make a profit no matter what it costs the environment or others.*

When Barrytron learns that they are polluting the creek, they are "absolutely sick" about it. They had no intention on polluting the town. After all, Barrytron has always "attempted to be a perfect model of corporate good citizenship, no matter what it cost."

Obviously, if Barrytron really cared about being "a perfect model of corporate good citizenship" they would not hire the services of the Maritimo Brothers. Barrytron knows the construction company is crooked, but they use their services anyway to secure more profits, much to the detriment of the environment.

Kilgore's "situation," Vonnegut says, is that he is a "machine," but this is "complex" and "tragic." There is a part of Kilgore, a "sacred part," that "remains an unwavering band of light." Vonnegut explains that he himself is a "meat machine" who is writing a book, but "at the core of the writing meat machine is something sacred, which is an unwavering band of light." Everyone who reads this book likewise has a "band of unwavering light." Vonnegut's New York City doorbell rings. He doesn't know who is there, but when he opens the door, he is sure to find "an unwavering band of light" behind it. "God bless Rabo Karabekian!" Vonnegut writes.

Vonnegut's "spiritual climax," or his realization that people, including his characters, are sentient human beings and not machines, is brought about by Rabo's art. This, coupled with his description of the "unwavering band of light" as "sacred," seems to go against the grain of Vonnegut's impassioned argument that art doesn't have inherent meaning or value. Vonnegut has already vowed to keep that which is sacred, and in this vein, he implies that perhaps art is sacred after all.

As Kilgore arrives at the Holiday Inn, he hopes that his plastic-coated feet will leave marks on the carpet. Unfortunately, the plastic is completely hard, and his footprints leave only small, disappearing dents. He walks across the lobby, "an inkless printing press," and looks around. There are **leaks** everywhere; hanging on the walls, on the cigarette and candy machines, and one whole wall, which separates the lobby from the lounge, is one giant mirror.

The mirrors, or "leaks," serve to separate Kilgore's blue-collar life as a window installer from the sophisticated and cultured world of the artists. When Kilgore enters the lounge, he effectively crosses over into an entirely different universe that exists on the other side of the mirrors.

Milo Maritimo, a "beautiful young desk clerk," greets Kilgore happily. "Mr. Trout," Milo says in "rapture." He would know Kilgore anywhere, he says. "Welcome to Midland City. We *need* you so!" Kilgore is confused. How does this stranger know him? Milo hopes that Midland City will go down in history as the first town to "acknowledge the greatness of Kilgore Trout." He has read all of Kilgore's books—those in Eliot Rosewater's personal library at least—and he stares at Kilgore with admiration. "We are so ready for a Renaissance, Mr. Trout!" Milo says. "You will be our Leonardo!"

Milo's reliance on Kilgore to lead Midland City in a cultural Renaissance through his writing is absurd, but Milo nevertheless believes that Kilgore's writing will have that very effect. Of course, it does, which further underscores this absurdity. In this way, Vonnegut again reverts to the argument that art is subjective—where most others have found zero value and talent, Midland City finds the work of Kilgore comparable to the masterpieces of Leonardo DaVinci.

Milo shows Kilgore to his room so that he can change into his high school tuxedo and the new shirt he purchased in New York City. His room is a suite, which is two identical rooms joined by a door, and it is full of flowers and welcome cards from local businesses. "The town certainly seems to be getting behind the arts in a great way," Kilgore says.

Kilgore's "suite" again reflects the arbitrary nature of words and meaning. There is nothing special about Kilgore's suite—it is simply two rooms combined—but since it is called a "suite" it automatically becomes superior.

"Oh, Mr. Trout," Milo says, "teach us to sing and dance and laugh and cry." Kilgore is stunned. "Open your eyes!" he yells at Milo. "Do I look like a dancer, a singer, a man of joy? [...] Would a man nourished by beauty look like this? You have nothing but desolation and desperation here, you say? I bring you more of the same!"

The fact that Kilgore brings only "desolation and desperation" not "beauty" reflects his identity as an anti-artist. As Kilgore maintains that there is no truth or beauty in the world, he is likewise unable to present it in the form of his art.

CHAPTER 21

As Kilgore enters the cocktail lounge, Bonnie MacMahon has just yelled at Rabo Karabekian, and Rabo has illuminated everyone about **his painting** with his explanation of "bands of light." Bonnie says to Rabo: "All you had to do was explain. I understand now." A man standing nearby nods. "I didn't think there was anything *to* explain, but there was, by God." Another man sitting next to Rabo turns to him and says: "If artists would explain more, people would like art more. You realize that?"

Rabo's need to explain his painting in order for it to be understood and appreciated again underscores the subjectivity of art. Midland City is not able to glean Rabo's specific message without first being told what it is. Their immediate acceptance of Rabo's painting, however, also emphasizes how eager society is to find deep meaning in art, which further places it on a pedestal.

Kilgore has a copy of his novel, *Now It Can Be Told*, and he looks anxiously around the lounge. Sitting in the bar, Dwayne, Kilgore, and Vonnegut form "an equilateral triangle about twelve feet," and each of them is "an unwavering band of light." They are "simple and separate and beautiful. As machines, [they] are flabby bags of ancient plumbing and wiring," but a part of them is sacred.

Vonnegut's admission that all of them—Dwayne, Kilgore, and Vonnegut himself—each have a sacred "unwavering band of light" again underscores the fact that they are not machines, and that they are sentient beings with feelings worth noting and respecting.

As Dwayne sits alone in the lounge, his thoughts begin to wander. He remembers something his stepfather had told him as a child. During the First World War, scores of black people came North from the South to work in the factories, and for the first time ever, they were able to make a good living. Over in Shepherdstown, however, the white people decided they didn't want black people living in their town, so they put signs up all over town and at the railroad yard. The signs read: "NIGGER! THIS IS SHEPHERDSTOWN. GOD HELP YOU IF THE SUN EVER SETS ON YOU HERE!"

Dwayne's impassioned and unhinged aside is another reflection of the racism present in American society. Furthermore, it also emphasizes how far-reaching these racist ideas truly are. Dwayne's story is not merely a hateful and meaningless anecdote that he remembers from childhood—it has real and lasting implications since people of color still avoid going to Shepherdstown.

One night, according to Dwayne's stepfather, a black family failed to see the signs and attempted to spend the night in an empty shack. A "mob" arrived after midnight and abducted the man as he slept and "sawed him in two on the top strand of a barbed-wire fence." Ever since, Dwayne's stepfather said, "there ain't been a Nigger even spend the night in Shepherdstown." Incidentally, this is why, according to Vonnegut, Bonnie MacMahon's carwash went bankrupt. To be successful, a carwash "needs cheap and plentiful labor, which meant black labor—and there are no Niggers in Shepherdstown."

While Dwayne's stepfather's story about the one black family who dared to spend the night in Shepherdstown at first seems too violent and awful to be believable, it echoes the actions of many "mobs" throughout history. The appalling treatment of people of color by white Americans is real and well documented, and this story draws attention to this often-ignored reality.

Kilgore "dreads eyes contact," so he begins to look through the envelope Fred T. Barry sent him. In addition to being the Chairman of the Festival, Barry is also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Barryton, Ltd., and he has given Kilgore stock in the company so that he might "feel like a member of [their] family." The company began in 1934 as The Robo-Magic Corporation of America, which designed the first automatic washing machine for home use. The Robo-Magic motto is at the top of the stock certificate, and it reads: "GOODBYE BLUE MONDAY."

Kilgore doesn't want to make eye contact because he suspects that he is a creation, or one of Vonnegut's machines. The stock certificate that Fred T. Barry gifts Kilgore is more evidence of capitalism in American society. Like Harry and Grace's Xerox stock, the piece of paper will allow Kilgore to easily make "money magic."

Robo-Magic's motto assumes that women do the wash on Mondays, and since no one likes doing the laundry, Monday is a "blue" day. Of course, women do laundry whenever they want to—even Dwayne can remember his own stepmother doing the wash on Christmas Eve during the Depression—so the motto isn't true. Still, Monday became known as "Blue Monday" because women hate laundry, and the Robo-Magic was going to cheer them up."

As Robo-Magic's motto, "Goodbye Blue Monday," is not rooted in any real truth, it is another example of the arbitrary nature of language. "Blue Monday" has absolutely nothing to do with laundry, but since Robo-Magic says it does, it is so. The meaning of the ad is convenient, not inherent.


The owners of Robo-Magic were the only people rich enough to afford advertising during the Depression, and they rented the only billboard in town. The billboard featured a "high society woman in a fur coat and pearls" on her way out for an "afternoon of idleness." The conversation bubble coming from her mouth read: "Off to the bridge club while my Robo-Magic does the wash! Goodbye, Blue Monday!"

The subjective nature of the ad is further reflected in the picture it depicts. Women during the Depression were likely unable to relate to a "high society woman in a fur coat and pearls," and they likely never had the occasion or means for an "afternoon of idleness."


The Robo-Magic people bought another billboard, near the railroad depot, and this billboard depicted two white deliverymen delivering a Robo-Magic washing machine. A "black maid" stands nearby, and there is a conversation bubble coming from her mouth as well. It read: "Feets, get movin'! Dey's got theirselves a Robo-Magic! Dey ain't gonna be needin' us 'roun' here no mo'!"

Robo-Magic's advertising also serves to perpetuate racism in American society. This ad dehumanizes the black maid by conflating her with a machine as well, which implies that she is only worth the work she is able to perform in the service of white people.


The owner of Robo-Magic wrote his own advertisements, and he "predicted" that Robo-Magic appliances would one day "do what he called 'all the Nigger work of the world,'" which is all the "lifting and cleaning and cooking and washing and ironing and tending children and dealing with filth." When Dwayne was a child, his stepmother refused to do housework. The "white men wouldn't do it either, of course. They called it *women's work*, and the women called it *Nigger work*."

Again, the Robo-Magic's ads are a reflection of the owner's own racism, which also pervades most of society. Even Dwayne's stepmother also makes a deeply racist comment when she refers to undesirable work as "Nigger work." In this way, Dwayne's stepmother implies that black people are better suited to complete this work because it is considered beneath the white population.

During World War Two, Robo-Magic was turned into an armory, and "all that survived of the Robo-Magic itself was its brain" that told the machine when to drain water or agitate. The Robo-Magic brain became the "BLINC System," which was installed on bombers to release "bombs in such a way as to achieve a desired pattern of explosions on the planet below."

The hatefulness of the racist Robo-Magic company lives on in the machine's brain, which continues to destroy people in the form of bombs dropped by the United States military, an institution Vonnegut has already identified as volatile and discriminatory.

CHAPTER 22

Sitting in the cocktail lounge, Vonnegut decides that Dwayne has taken a "course in speed-reading" at the Young Men's Christian Association. This way, when Dwayne finds Kilgore's book, he will be able to read it fast. Vonnegut then takes a "white pill" that his doctor has given him and told him to "take in moderations, two a day, in order not to feel blue."

Vonnegut's interjection that Dwayne has taken a speed-reading course is absurd but in keeping with his argument that art is often absurd. The "white pill" he takes further evidence of Vonnegut's own mental illness.

Vonnegut also decides that Kilgore could never have made it to Midland City from New York in the time that he has given him, but there is no time to fix it now. "Let it stand," Vonnegut writes. "Let it stand!" Vonnegut also decides to explain beforehand about a high school jacket Kilgore will see at the hospital after Dwayne attacks him.

Again, Kilgore's ability to make it to Midland City is absurd, but as Vonnegut argues, so is art. Therefore, he "let[s] it stand!"

The jacket Kilgore sees at the hospital is from the only "Nigger high school" Midland City had for many years. The school was named after Crispus Attucks, a black man who was shot dead by British troops before the American Revolution. The black people who go to school there don't call the school Crispus Attucks High School; instead they call it "Innocent Bystander High," and the back of the jacket in question has a picture of a black man with a bullet hole in his head.

The school jackets worn by those at Crispus Attucks High School imply that black Americans, like Crispus Attucks himself was, are the "Innocent Bystanders" of America's racist society. Black men are frequently the object of violence in America simply because of their skin color, which Vonnegut points out is sad and ridiculous.

Suddenly, Dwayne's "bad chemicals" decide that it is time for him to discover "the secrets of life." Dwayne approaches Kilgore, who is holding his book, *Now It Can Be Told*, and points to the book. "Is this it? Is this it?" Dwayne asks, pulling at the book. Kilgore doesn't know what Dwayne is talking about, but he wants him to go away, so he agrees. "Yes—that's it," Kilgore says. Dwayne opens the book and begins to quickly read. "Everybody else is a robot, a machine," the book says. Dwayne continues to devour the book on the spot. "You are pooped and demoralized," he reads. "Why wouldn't you be? Of course it is exhausting, having to reason all the time in a universe which wasn't meant to be reasonable."

Kilgore's book gives Dwayne the answers he is looking for. Much of his disillusionment with life and his struggles with depression stem from his wife's suicide and his son's sexuality. If everyone in Dwayne's life is a robot as Kilgore's book suggests, then Dwayne can avoid the painful implications of Celia's death—that she was incredibly depressed and unhappy—and he can also avoid grappling with Bunny's sexuality, which he considers abnormal and inappropriate. Thinking of his wife and son as machines allows Dwayne to avoid issues that he deems too uncomfortable to directly deal with.

CHAPTER 23

Dwayne continues reading the book. "You are surrounded by loving machines, hating machines, greedy machines, unselfish machines, brave machines," and on and on it goes. "Their only purpose is to stir you up in every conceivable way," Kilgore's book tells Dwayne, "so the Creator of the Universe can watch your reactions." The Creator apologizes to Dwayne for giving him such terrible companions on Earth, and then the Creator apologizes for the state of the planet. The Creator had "programmed robots to abuse [Earth] for millions of years, so it would be a poisonous, festering cheese" when Dwayne got here. The Creator also "programmed" the robots, "regardless of their living conditions, to crave sexual intercourse and adore infants more than almost anything."

Vonnegut draws a parallel between Kilgore's book and the actual destruction of the planet due to pollution and overpopulation, which are issues he belabors in other ways as well. Of course, in Kilgore's book, the plant is polluted and destroyed simply in an effort to produce a free-will response from Dwayne, or whoever happens to read the book, but the environment is nevertheless destroyed. He also explains overpopulation by programming people to "crave" sex and "adore infants," which add to the problem of overpopulation in American society.

Dwayne finishes the entire book, "having wolfed down tens of thousands of words of such solipsistic whimsey in ten minutes or so," and walks toward Bunny at the piano. Bunny sees him approaching and is sure that he is about to die, so he begins to meditate. Dwayne grabs him from the back of the head and rolls his head "like a cantaloupe up and down the keys of the piano." Bunny does not fight back, and blood soaks the keys. "God damn cock-sucking machine!" Dwayne yells at his son.

Vonnegut's description of Kilgore's book as "solipsistic whimsey" reflects Dwayne's egocentrism. Solipsism assumes that the self is the only thing that truly exists, and since he believes everyone else is a robot, Dwayne likewise believes that he is the only one who truly exists in the universe. In this way, Vonnegut implies that American society is equally self-centered.

Rabo Karabekian and Beatrice Keedsler try to intervene, but Dwayne attacks them as well. "Never hit a woman, right?" Dwayne yells as he punches Beatrice in the face. He then punches Bonnie MacMahon in the stomach and suddenly stops. "All you robots what to know why my wife [Celia] ate Drāno?" he cries. "I'll tell you why: She was that kind of machine!"

Again, by thinking of his wife as a robot who was simply programmed to commit suicide, Dwayne avoids having to wrestle with the seriousness of mental illness and the impact it has had on his life. Like American society itself, Dwayne avoids topics he considers uncomfortable or taboo.

Dwayne's "rampage" takes him from the Holiday Inn to his Pontiac dealership, where he assaults Francine Pefko. He then runs to the interstate where he is apprehended by two police officers, but before he is, he first stops in the parking lot of his dealership. He is looking for "Niggers," and he begins to yell: "Olly-olly-ox-in-freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" Wayne Hoobler steps out from a between a row of cars.

Dwayne's search for black people is framed as a cruel sort of game, which again reflects racism in American society. Dwayne is hoping to find a person of color simply so he can physically attack one.

"There you are," Dwayne says to Wayne. Wayne is a "typical black robot," and Dwayne begins to tell Wayne about his experience with black people in Midland City. Dwayne had served as the County Executive for the Boy Scouts of America just a few years back, and he had brought in a record number of young black recruits. He had also protested the execution of a young black man at the prison in Shepherdstown, and he hired black people when no one else in town would. Some of his black employees have even been "energetic" and "punctual." Dwayne winks. "They were programmed that way," he says.

Dwayne seems to be attempting to convince himself as well as Wayne that he is not a racist. However, it's clear that he doesn't employ and help the black community because he truly cares—he simply wants to make himself feel better about his own efforts to combat social injustice. However, like Francine, Dwayne too perpetuates racist stereotypes. By claiming that, contrary to popular belief, black workers can actually be "energetic" and "punctual" he suggests that most are lazy and frequently late.

Dwayne tells Wayne about his wife, Celia, and about Bunny being a homosexual. "White robots are just like black robots," Dwayne says, "in that they are programmed to be whatever they are, to do whatever they do." Then Dwayne swings at Wayne, but he dodges the blow. "African dodger!" Dwayne yells as he continues to try to punch him. Wayne bounces and weaves, avoiding each punch. Dwayne stops, deciding it is no use. "You're too good for me," Dwayne says. "Only a perfect hitting machine could hit him."

Dwyane's racist rant, however, ultimately concludes with the realization that there is not an inherent or innate difference between black people and white people—the only difference is how society views them. They are essentially the same "robot" that is "programmed" to do different things, which implies that all people, regardless of color, should be equal.


Dwayne begins talking again and tells Wayne all about "human slavery." It is not only black people who are slaves, Dwayne believes, but white workers too. "Coal miners" and "workers on assembly lines" are slaves as well. "I used to think that was such as shame," Dwayne says, sadly. Now, however, Dwayne could not care less about them. "Why should I care what happens to machines?" Dwayne says, leaving Wayne alone in the parking lot.

Dwayne's comment that the idea of slavery used to upset him before he began to view people as machines underscores Vonnegut's argument that thinking of people in this way allows for society to more easily accept and perpetuate atrocities such as slavery. Dwayne doesn't have to care about slavery if those it affects aren't really flesh and blood humans.


CHAPTER 24

Dwayne attacks so many people on his "rampage," that a "special ambulance known as *Martha*" is called to the scene. The ambulance can hold up to thirty-six "disaster victims," and it has an operating room and enough food to last for an entire week. The ambulance is named for the wife of a Country Commissioner who died from rabies after she was bitten by a bat. "My psychiatrist is also named Martha," Vonnegut writes. Martha is on vacation now, but Vonnegut "likes her a lot."

By mentioning his own psychiatrist, Martha, Vonnegut again underscores that mental illness is commonplace in society and attempts to destigmatize it. By writing about his own illness, Vonnegut attempts to start a conversation about mental health, which will ultimately shine light on the problem and, hopefully, help those who suffer.

Aboard *Martha* is two physicians, Cyprian Ukwende and Khashdrahr Miasma, who is from Bangladesh. A young "white American" named Eddie Key is driving the disaster vehicle, and he is the direct descendant of Francis Scott Key, the man who wrote the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Eddie knows the history of over six hundred of his ancestors, which includes "Africans, Indians, and white men."

Eddie's relation to Francis Scott Key firmly establishes him as an American, and his diverse family tree reflects the country's own diversity. Dr. Ukwende and Dr. Miasma also reflect this diversity, which Vonnegut implies is something to value, not discriminate against.

Dwayne boards the ambulance wrapped "tightly in canvas restraining sheets." He is unaware of his surroundings and yells, "Goodbye, Blue Monday!" as Kilgore boards the ambulance unassisted. Kilgore is one of the "walking wounded," and he holds up a bloody hand for Dr. Ukwende to assess. Kilgore had grabbed Dwayne from behind as he gave Francine Pefko the beating "his bad chemicals made him think she richly deserved." He had already broken her jaw and several ribs by the time a crowd began to form. "Best fucking machine in the State," Dwayne yelled. "Wind her up, and she'll fuck you and say she loves you, and she won't shut up till you give a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise."

When Dwayne boards the ambulance he is wrapped in a straight-jacket ("canvas restraining sheets"), which reflects the total deterioration of his mental health. Sadly, Dwayne's illness has caused him to assault Francine, whom he believes to be a robot programmed to sleep with him and then expect money and gifts. Dwayne's comment about Francine echoes popular stereotypes in American society that assume woman are made simply for the pleasure of men, and that they are entitled and expect gifts in exchange for that sex.

When Kilgore tried to stop Dwayne from beating Francine, Dwayne bit off Kilgore's finger and spit it into Sugar Creek. "This isn't the kind of book where people get what is coming to them in the end," Vonnegut writes. Except for Don Breedlove, who raped Patty Keene behind the Bannister Memorial Fieldhouse. Don was in the kitchen fixing a gas oven when Dwayne went crazy in the lounge of the Holiday Inn. He stepped out of the kitchen to see Dwayne, whom he already knew because Dwayne had sold him a "lemon" from his dealership.

The fact that Vonnegut's characters don't "get what is coming to them in the end" is another example of his own efforts to "snub" traditional storytelling and write the antinovel. Vonnegut does, however, give Don Breedlove what he believes he deserves, which implies that Vonnegut considers rape and violence against women one of society's most troublesome and offensive atrocities.

Dwayne didn't actually sell Don a "lemon"—the neighborhood kids had poured maple syrup in the gas tank—but Dwayne had tried to fix it anyway. As Dwayne approached Don at the Holiday Inn, he shook his hand, then Dwayne punched him hard in the side of the head. Don will "never hear anything with that ear, ever again."

The fact that Dwayne tried to do good for the car even though it wasn't really a lemon implies that he is actually a good person, and that it is his mental illness, not his innate self, that is causing him to behave so violently and cruelly.

Aboard *Martha*, Dr. Ukwende tries to remove Dwayne's shoes, but he has waded through Sugar Creek as well, and his socks and shoes have turned to plastic. Dr. Ukwende is plenty used to "plasticized, unitized shoes and socks." He sees it all the time when kids come into the emergency room, and he even has a special pair of tinsnips he uses to cut them free. "Get some shears," Dr. Ukwende says to Dr. Khashdrahr.

Dr. Ukwende's familiarization with the "plasticized, unitized shoes and socks" is another reflection of the severity of the pollution and destruction of the planet. While Kilgore's plastic pantlegs seem ridiculous and far-fetched, Dr. Ukwende is used to seeing the pollution of Sugar Creek come through his emergency room.

For a moment, Dwayne's "awareness returns to Earth," and he begins to talk lucidly. He tells Dr. Ukwende that he is going to open a new health club in Midland City. Dwayne plans to open the health club and sell it for a profit as soon as possible. "People get all enthusiastic about getting back in shape or losing some pounds," Dwayne says. "They sign up for the program, but then they lose interest in about a year, and they stop coming. That's how people are."

The fact that Dwayne is still scheming ways to make money and open a new business even during an acute episode of insanity speaks to how deeply money and capitalism has affected society. Even though he is sick and about to be arrested, he is still trying to make more money.

Dwayne never does open a health club. Instead, he is mercilessly sued by all the people he attacked and is "rendered destitute." He loses his fancy house and moves to "Skid Row" to live at the Fairchild Hotel. When people in town pass him on the street they say, "See him? Can you believe it? He doesn't have doodley-squat now, but he used to be fabulously well-to-do."

When Dwayne goes from rags to riches, this again underscores the unequal distribution of wealth in American society and emphasizes how differently the poor live from the wealthy in America.

EPILOGUE

Fred T. Barry postpones the Festival on account of Dwayne's outburst, but no one bothers to tell Kilgore. As he begins walking toward the arts center, Vonnegut sits "waiting to intercept him, about six blocks away." The part of town where Vonnegut sits is deserted and quiet, and Kilgore is the only one around.

When Fred T. Barry forgets to tell Kilgore that the Festival has been cancelled, this again underscores the subjectivity of art. Rosewater is Kilgore's fan, not Barry, and Barry doesn't even think about Kilgore when the Festival falls apart.

Vonnegut gets out of the car to approach Kilgore, but Kilgore tuns and walks quickly in the other direction. Vonnegut jumps in the car and begins to chase him. "Whoa! Whoa! Mr. Trout!" Vonnegut yells. "Whoa! Mr. Trout!" He tells Kilgore that he is "a friend" and that he "has nothing to fear." Kilgore finally stops. "Mr. Trout," Vonnegut says. "I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books." He explains to Kilgore that they are in a novel, and then he offers to answer any questions Kilgore has. "If I were in your spot, I would certainly have lots of questions," Vonnegut says.

Vonnegut's offer to explain the novel to Kilgore is another example of the subjectivity of art. The meaning of Vonnegut's novel may not be readily apparent to Kilgore, and he wants to explain. Of course, Kilgore just thinks he is crazy, which again underscores insanity and mental health, both in the novel and in American society since Vonnegut operates in both.

"Under similar spiritual conditions," Vonnegut tells Kilgore, "Count Tolstoy freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career." Kilgore stares at him, disbelievingly. "Mr. Trout," Vonnegut says, "you are *free*." Vonnegut considers shaking Kilgore's hand, but it is wrapped in a bandage. "*Bon voyage*," Vonnegut says to Kilgore and "disappears."

When Vonnegut sets Kilgore free, he does so because of Kilgore's "unwavering light." Kilgore is a character in the novel, but Vonnegut treats him as an actual person, with actual thoughts and feelings, and Vonnegut believes this should be respected.

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